Galaxy®
MAGAZINE

AUGUST 1961 50¢ K

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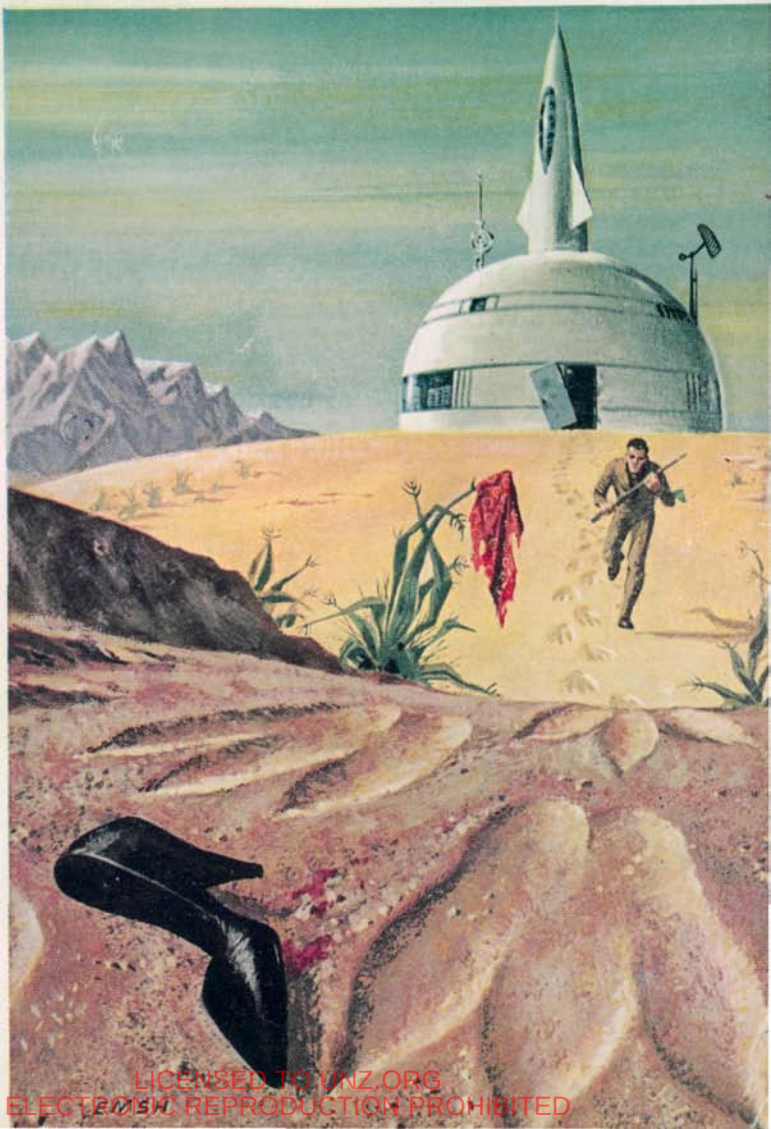

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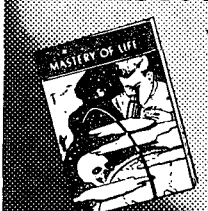

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AUGUST, 1961 **Galaxy** VOL. 19, NO. 6

MAGAZINE

CONTENTS

NOVELLA

THE MOON MOTH ..... *by Jack Vance* 159

NOVELETTES

THE GATEKEEPERS ..... *by J. T. McIntosh* 8

THE AIR OF CASTOR OIL ..... *by Jim Harmon* 68

THE KING OF THE CITY ..... *by Keith Laumer* 92

SHORT STORIES

LOCHINVAR ..... *by Margaret St. Clair* 34

THE GOD NEXT DOOR ..... *by Bill Doede* 42

ALOYS ..... *by R. A. Lafferty* 59

THE STUFF ..... *by Henry Slesar* 86

RETURN ENGAGEMENT ..... *by Lester del Rey* 119

THE DEEP DOWN DRAGON ..... *by Judith Merril* 142

FEATURES

NOTES FROM THE EDITOR'S PAD 5

FORECAST 83

EXTRATERRESTRIAL TRILOGUE ..... *by Sheri S. Eberhart* 84

CONVENTION NEWS 91

FOR YOUR INFORMATION ..... *by Willy Ley* 131

FIVE STAR SHELF ..... *by Floyd C. Gale* 154

Cover by **EMSH** illustrating **THE DEEP DOWN DRAGON**

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NOTES FROM AN EDITOR'S PAD

READERS suffering from a touch of insomnia, especially if they don't happen to live more than two or three states away from New York, may now and then hear a radio program called "The Party Line," in which Long John Nebel and a panel of cohorts nightly plumb the problems of the world. In their time, they have looked into everything from the first-hand stories of men who claimed to be on friendly terms with flying-saucer people to the offstage opinions of show-biz folk.

Not too long ago the subject was science fiction. The panel for the night included Lester del Rey (author of *Nerves, The Wind Between the Worlds* and innumerable other fine science-fiction stories), James Blish (author of *A Case of Conscience, Surface Tension* and, again, innumerable others) and Frederik Pohl (who, among other attributes, has lately been an occupant of *Galaxy's* editorial masthead.)

In five and a half hours (the program begins at midnight and ends somewhere around dawn), there is time to explore a subject pretty thoroughly. That night science fiction got about as intensive a going-over as it has had in public for some years. The verdict: Mixed, but hopeful.

"The trouble with science fiction," began Lester del Rey — striking a note that makes an interesting harmony with his story in this issue — "is that too much of the wonder has gone out of it. The wonder is still around us. Science still has exciting new things to write about. But to make them into stories requires thought — and too many writers just won't give their stories that much thought."

But, the panel agreed, there are more troubles than that. And one of the troubles is that no two people seem to be able to agree just what a science-fiction story is in the first place, much less what is good and what is bad in science fiction.

"Every good writer who comes to science fiction makes his own rules," Jim Blish said. "There's very little in common between, say, Ray Bradbury and Hal Clement. The only definition I know that fits at least most of the cases is Theodore Sturgeon's: 'A science fiction story is a story like any other story except that, if you

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subtract the scientific element from it, there isn't any story left at all.'"

Naturally the panel at once began listing stories which were exceptions to even that rule . . . and so it went on, until the dawn.

There was much more — five and a half hours more — including excursions into psionics ("Not a science," ruled Blish and del Rey; "Well, maybe it might be, some day," ventured Pohl), dianetics, deros, fan feuds, convention goings-on and . . . well . . . everything.

The producer of the show tells us that it was taped and will probably be replayed some time in the future. Maybe you'd enjoy sampling it when it is.

MEANWHILE, what about it? Is there a definition of science fiction that makes sense? And is it true that modern science gives writers countless opportunities to write fine science-fiction stories?

Modern science probably gives just about everybody just about everything, since it operates in so many areas and on so many levels. The satellites and atomic-propelled submarines are "modern science." So are the confusing flip-flop reversals that characterize so much of the theory behind the "life sciences." (Neurosis is — isn't — *is* caused by childhood shock, with no physical basis. Microbiological theory tells us how penicillin attacks germs, so we can chemic up a new penicillin that will kill penicillin-resistant staphylococcus — only the staph fools us by adopting a whole new metabolism that pretends penicillin doesn't exist. Soil conservation techniques, warding against fire and like catastrophes, turn out merely to insure that when the catastrophe does come it is enormously more destructive . . . Say, is that an idea for a story? Is the universe really out to *get* us?)

On its higher, more abstruse levels, certainly there is much in modern science that is hardly known to the non-technical world, much less adopted by science-fiction writers for their stories. "Science," says Dr. Edward Teller, "is constantly becoming more simple and more beautiful." And certainly we are each year acquiring new insights into the grandeurs of the basic laws of the universe; and certainly wonderful patterns and unexpected relationships begin to appear.

But it's at least a question whether the basic laws of the universe are very useful to the science-fiction writer. And it's hardly a question at all that the sputniks and Moon probes are no longer in themselves enough to build science fiction out of. (We can't compete with the daily papers!) So between the here-and-now

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(rockets) and the far-out (the Dirac universe, Hoyle's steady-state cosmology and, yes, psionics) there should be a middle ground, a world of scientific ideas neither too big nor too little to spark great science-fiction stories.

We maintain that ground exists. Confound it, we maintain that *Galaxy* has pitched its tent on it for lo, these many years!

THE here-and-now no longer has the "wonder" we seek. The all-embracing cosmic discovery is too remote. (Honorable exceptions? Sure! But how few?) Of smaller bits our lives are made, and it is stories that touch our own lives in some way that give us pleasure.

We think that good science fiction occurs when the static nucleus ("writer") absorbs the plodding neutron ("scientific idea") and, willy-nilly, explodes into the searing hard radiation that illuminates our lives, inside and out — "good science-fiction story."

"Good" becomes "best" when the scientific idea is itself something fresh and interesting, or when the writer has found something new to say about it. It does not have to be something as big as a theory of the origin of the universe. It can be:

What would happen if we raised human beings in germ-free environments, as we now do with laboratory animals? (Allen Kim Lang's *World in a Bottle.*) Or: Suppose non-material aliens attack and we have to fight them? (Daniel F. Galouye's *Fighting Spirit.*) Or: What if evolution continues and the dog evolves to roughly human intelligence, the human to something beyond? (Damon Knight's *Auto-da-Fe.*) Or: How would an alien, not malevolent, go about getting the things it needed from a human child? (Theodore Stugeon's *Tandy's Story.*) Or: What will it be like in the Sahara when at last we get around to reclaiming it as living space? (Mack Reynolds's *Farmer.*)

These, you know, are stories that appeared right here in *Galaxy* in the last few months! Every one of them was solidly built on a basis of scientific idea, every one of them was handsomely extrapolated and brilliantly detailed.

Of course, there are more kinds of good science fiction than we have indicated here — as James Blish says, there's a kind for every good writer. But there is the middle ground where the "wonder" can be found. And it's fertile soil!

There's nothing wrong with science fiction — nothing that good stories won't cure; and we think we've got them for you!

That's our opinion — what's yours?

— THE EDITOR

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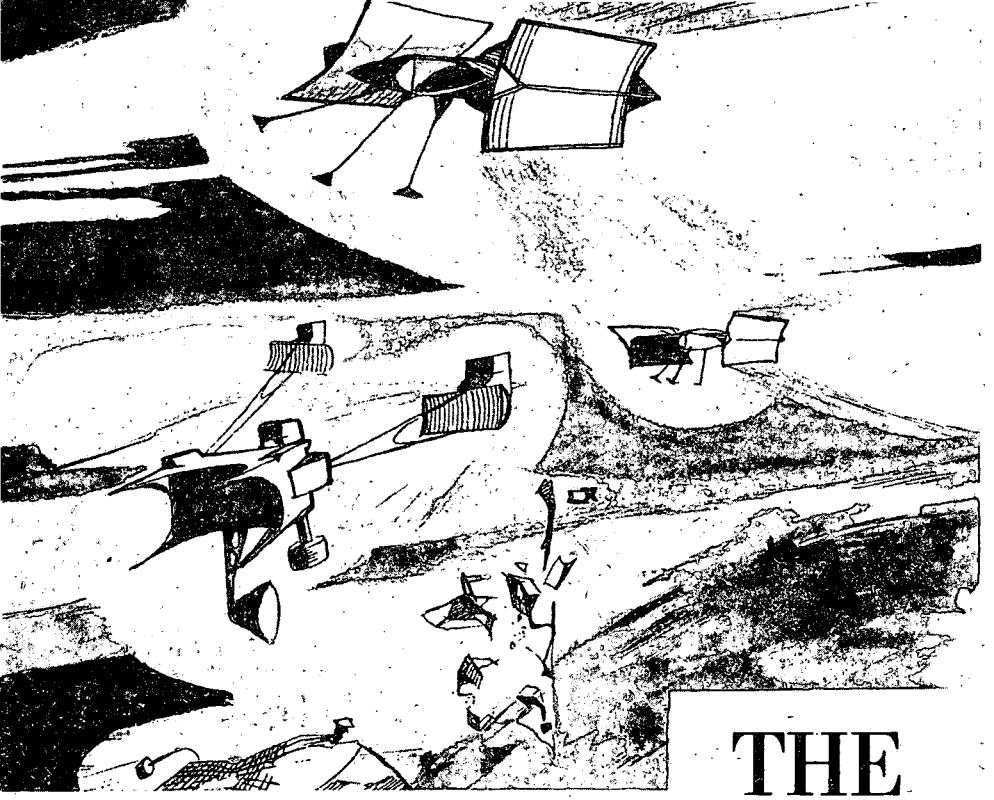

THE

I

AS the ships of two warring worlds fought savagely in space and in air over Belcron, Moka's capital city, Hugh Hawkins paced anxiously up and down the vast, empty MT area. It wasn't his own safety he was concerned about — the Singalese ships would be as careful as Moka's own not to run any risk of damaging the Gate, and it was for that reason that Hugh's standing orders were to take cover in the MT area at the first threat of an enemy raid.

Although scores of people were dying every minute all around him, Hugh Hawkins, the Mokan Gatekeeper, had no choice but to stay under cover and take no part in defense duties or even rescue operations. Not for Hugh Hawkins the safest of space-raid duties. He was far too valuable.

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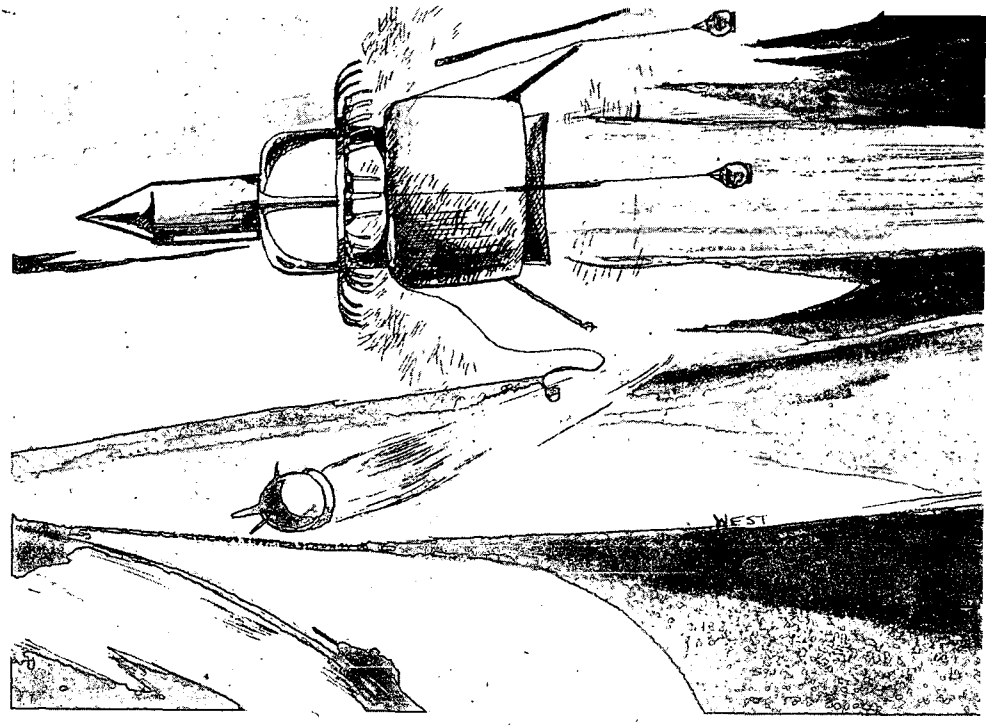

GATEKEEPERS

Besides, he was technically neutral.

Of course, it was always possible in such a ferocious, chaotic battle that a stray shot would find him, or that a damaged ship would crash down on the huge enclosures which was generally known as the Gate. But if that happened, if the Gate itself was accidentally destroyed, Hugh Hawkins wouldn't be valuable any more.

The equation of power was easily balanced: He had the key to victory in their struggle against another planet — they had his wife!

By J. T. McINTOSH
Illustrated by WEST

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It was not, however, any such considerations that made Hugh so jumpy. It was the fact that Alice was out in the middle of the turmoil.

When the first warning came, a special flash to the Gatekeeper, Hugh had tried to take her to the Gate with him. But she had pointed out that it was test night and he'd have to be at the Gate until after midnight. So if they both went there straight away, and the fighting went on into the evening, they'd get nothing to eat all day.

"I'll stay and fix a picnic dinner, honey," she had said. "You get over right away. I'll follow when I'm ready."

He had protested, but she had pointed out that she wasn't under strict orders to dive for cover at the first hint of a raid, and he was. "Maybe I'll get there before anything happens," she had said optimistically.

But she hadn't. The fighting had lasted for over an hour already. And merely by the noise and the ground tremors Hugh could tell that it was a big raid.

He clenched and unclenched his hands. Didn't she know that he'd rather go hungry all day and all night than go through this torment? He was so sick with worry that by the time she did arrive he wouldn't be able to eat anyway.

Strictly, no one but the Gatekeeper himself was allowed in the MT area, not even the Gatekeeper's wife. Nearly two years ago, however, Hugh had told the Secretary flatly that he wouldn't take refuge there unless Alice could come too. The Secretary had shrugged and said, "Oh, well." So two people out of Moka's two billion were allowed to enter the MT enclosure—Hugh and Alice Hawkins. The Secretary wasn't. The President wasn't. Most particularly the army and navy chiefs weren't.

Hugh walked across bare concrete to the door through which Alice would enter.

On the other side of that door were three sentries. A guardhouse was built onto the Gate enclosure on the left; and other guards protected all the access roads around the Gate. Most of the time only a token force policed the checkpoints, for the Gate without the Gatekeeper was like an omelette without eggs. But when Hugh was there, and most particularly every eleventh night, when the tests were run, the Gate was guarded more closely than the treasury vaults.

Hugh willed the bell over the door to ring. When it did ring, as he watched it, he jumped convulsively, his heart racing from shock. Leaping to the door, he pressed his thumb to the lock and

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— slowly and automatically, as though alive — it opened.

ALICE walked in nonchalantly, carrying a picnic basket. She was immaculate in a yellow nylon shirt and flared red skirt, with bubble stockings and red plastic shoes, as if she had dressed for a picnic in the country instead of a dash through a city of destruction and death.

"Did you have any trouble, darling?" Hugh asked, the weight suddenly lifted from his heart. "You took two hours."

"Did I? Well, I had to fix dinner. And naturally I had to change. You wouldn't want your wife to look like any ordinary pretty girl, would you?"

"Anyway, you're here now. Let's go to the office."

"Yes, let's." She looked round the empty concrete arena and shuddered slightly. "This place gives me the creeps when it's like this. And I used to love it when it was busy. Say, Hugh, I drove straight through without being stopped. There's three guards outside that door, of course, but they were the only ones I saw."

"I guess the raid has disorganized things. Is it bad out there, darling?"

"Pretty bad," she said quietly.

When they reached the office in the control block at the center of the area, Hugh phoned the checkpoints. He couldn't get an answer from Block A, but Block B replied at once.

"Say, Sergeant, my wife just drove straight through. Is something wrong?"

Sergeant Bronowski's voice came back. "We've been trying to raise Block A, sir, but can't. They may not have been hit, though. Communications often go during a raid. You think you're okay in there, sir? Hadn't you better go to one of the deep shelters?"

"I'm okay here. The Singalese ships won't harm the Gate," said Hugh confidently.

"If they're so careful about the Gate, how come they raid Belcron?"

"They've got to do it occasionally, Sergeant, in case we trade on the protection of the Gate and surround it with important personnel, munition dumps and our most dangerous — to them — defense installations."

"I get it, sir. Okay, we'll send a party over to Block A. Are you going ahead with the tests tonight, sir?"

"Oh, sure. Even if the fighting's still going on, it doesn't affect the tests. But I think the Singalese ships will be called off before the tests are due."

"I hope you're right, sir. I sure hope so."

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HUGH hung up and turned. Since he found Alice beside him, he reached out for her. At first he merely meant to touch her shoulder, but then, still affected by his recent fear when he had thought something might have happened to her, he found himself taking her in his arms and kissing her as if the date of their wedding had been next week instead of ten years past.

"Well, well," said Alice, surprised. "Haven't you made a mistake, Buster? I'm your wife."

"My wife is the most wonderful girl in the world. My wife is the most beautiful girl I know. My wife is the nicest, kindest, cleverest person I ever met."

"Thank you, honey," said Alice, kissing him tenderly. "The best of it is, all that you said is true."

It was true, certainly, that she was a beautiful girl. Her oval face was the kind beloved by artists and photographers but not movie directors — she looked too intelligent to be a film star. And her figure at twenty-eight was better than it had been at eighteen, when Hugh married her. Then she had been slim but angular, occasionally awkward. In the last ten years she had developed curves that she didn't possess before, but no bulges.

"I'm really a pretty lucky fellow," Hugh mused. "Married to a girl like you. Kept out of any danger in the middle of an interplanetary war. Given a nice house and paid a fat salary for doing not a hell of a lot."

A slight cloud passed over Alice's face. Although what Hugh said was essentially true, sometimes she wished Hugh was still an ordinary MTO. Since the war started four years ago there had been five Gatekeepers, and the other four hadn't retired voluntarily. Nor had they been sacked.

Two years ago, when Hugh had been appointed Gatekeeper, it had seemed, for one thing, that the war with Singal wouldn't last much longer. For another, MTOs were on half-pay for the duration, since they weren't doing anything, and the Hawkins's financial position had been close to desperate, especially as there had been a false alarm at the time that Alice was going to have a baby.

But two years later the war was still going on, and nobody believed any more that it would be over soon. Official propaganda was taking the line that it would last at least three years more. And official propaganda was generally over-optimistic.

Alice turned away and began to unpack the basket. Hugh moved after her and put his arms round her from behind. Although he had always known he loved her, not for years had he felt as he had felt in the last couple of

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hours, when he was forced to face the thought of life without her.

"Darling, it's much too soon to eat," he whispered. And he began to pull her shirt out of the waistband of her skirt.

"Hugh, it's the middle of the afternoon," she protested laughingly, "and broad daylight—"

"And we're in the center of the MT area," Hugh murmured, "the most private place in Belcron." He caressed her bare waist.

Her breath came faster. "I thought we were too old for this kind of behavior," she said.

They weren't.

II

CHET Blaken nodded to the guard and unlocked the door behind him. After he had passed through the door and locked it again, he expelled his breath in a slow sigh of relief, as he always did when he was alone in the vast MT area at Newlyon.

Blaken was an old man and it had been a long time since he had feared death. Yet only here, where there could be no danger of any kind, did he ever really relax.

He had been the Singalese Gatekeeper for eleven months now, and it seemed like eleven years. It wasn't death he feared. It was the possibility that if he were ever tested, he would be proved unworthy. Six other Singalese Gatekeepers had died rather than betray their beliefs — could he?

He was becoming more and more afraid that he couldn't. He wasn't brave. Indeed, he knew himself to be a physical coward. Perhaps he should resign, so that one of the two deputies could be appointed Gatekeeper. Perhaps it was his duty to resign.

In his mind he ran through the events which would follow his resignation. There would be surprise and suspicion when he said he wanted to resign, for a man of his known beliefs should never want to relinquish the post of Gatekeeper. Then he would have to complete the training of the new Gatekeeper. The master lock on the MT control board would be changed, the new lock keyed to the new Gatekeeper and not to him.

And everybody would know that he had resigned because he was a coward.

He shook his head. He wasn't brave enough to admit he was a coward. Even if it was his duty.

Besides, if he weren't Gatekeeper, what would he do in this bitter, all-embracing war between two sister-worlds which had become enemies?

Before Chet was appointed Gatekeeper, things had been

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tough for him, for he was a pacifist. In no circumstances would he have fought his fellow-man. So it was fortunate for him that he had been appointed to a job in which he had to be one hundred per cent non-combatant.

Fortunate? Yes, but the last eleven months had hardly been the happiest of his life.

In a few hours he would call Hugh Hawkins on Moka and they would talk before running the routine tests. It was only with Hugh, whom he had never seen, who was on a world at war with his own, that Chet could talk these days with any real sympathy and friendship.

IF ever two worlds shouldn't have fought a war, they were Moka and Singal. The only two inhabited worlds of the Biara system, they were so far from any other inhabited world that contact with the rest of the human race was slight and trade non-existent. Moka and Singal should have been the friendliest of sister-worlds, and for a long time they had been. There was little natural competition: Singal, the inner world, was poor in metals but rich in food, while Moka, a manufacturing world, grew little but made everything the two worlds needed.

And when the Gate had finally gone into operation after nearly fifty years of heartbreaking trial and error, and the loss of thousands of lives, it had seemed less than ever likely that the two worlds would ever have differences more serious than squabbles. Moka and Singal had seemed too dependent on each other ever to resort to war. The matter transmission Gates at Belcron on Moka and Newlyon on Singal had operated ceaselessly day and night. Metals, coal, manufactured goods, oil and synthetic textiles had passed through the Gate from Moka to Singal; meat, hides, wool, butter, cheese, grain, vegetables and wine had gone from Singal to Moka. The exchange had been roughly a million tons per day — roughly, for matter transmission was reckoned in volume rather than in weight.

Yet four years ago that had suddenly ceased. For four years the great MT areas had been empty and silent.

As usual, something to fight about had been found. The *casus belli* in this case was the asteroid belt between the two worlds. Moka was jealously afraid that Singal would get all the metals she needed there, set up factories and thus become independent; Singal objected to Moka's greedy cornering of all the natural resources in the system.

It had been predictable that when war did come it would be

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long, bitter and indecisive. Moka was short of food and Singal was short of everything else. But Moka could synthesize food and Singal could improvise. When the war finally did end, it wouldn't be because Moka was starving or because Singal had nothing left to fight with.

Chet glanced at his watch. It was only 7:23. Tests were usually carried out at midnight on the eleventh day, since conditions were best then on both worlds. Ten of Singal's days equalled eleven on Moka, with a little matter of eleven minutes over. Singal allowed for the eleven minutes by an adjustment every month.

IT took Chet five minutes to cross the vast reception area and reach the control block. He spent them envying Hugh Hawkins, not because Hugh was young, but because Hugh had a wife whom he loved and who loved him. Unlike Chet Blaken, Hugh Hawkins didn't have to face his vast responsibility always alone.

Chet went straight to the radio room and switched on the tape recorder. It was too soon to call Hugh; Hugh wouldn't come on the air until 11:30. Chet always recorded his talks with Hugh, and played them back when loneliness weighed most heavily on him. In the machine was the tape he had recorded at the last test, eleven days ago.

The machine started in the middle of conversation, the quality so good despite the fifty million miles between Singal and Moka that Hugh's cheerful young voice was reproduced as well as Chet's older, wearier tones.

". . . getting very short of white wine," Hugh was saying, "despite the fact that it's all been doctored with synthetic grape-juice and alcohol to make it go ten times as far — making it barely drinkable, as you might guess. You wouldn't drink the stuff, Chet. But it's still better than synthetic beer."

Chet's own voice: "I'll slip you half a dozen cases in the next test transmission. Sorry I can't get them for you now."

A slight plop—the tape recorder was monitored to operate only when there was a signal, and it took nine minutes for Chet's voice to reach Moka and the answer return. On playback, owing to the monitoring, there was no delay.

"You tempt me, Chet. God knows how you tempt me. But I won't accept the offer. If anybody found out, there'd be the devil to pay. And what happened here would be nothing to what would happen there if anybody discovered you'd been transmitting contraband. But I'll

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tell you what we *can* do. I'll send you that metal fishing-rod you wanted, made out of a new alloy, and your story can be that we wanted to test whether MT affected the temper. You'll get away with that because nothing of this material has ever been sent through the Gate. And you can send me a dozen chickens."

"Chickens?" Chet echoed, astonished. "I can't do that, Hugh. I'll get hung. Food is Number One contraband. One chicken, maybe, alive, since a living creature is the best test. But not a dozen, for Pete's sake. Hell, you wouldn't take wine and you want chickens! Have you gone crazy in the head, Hugh?"

The plop again, and then Hugh's chuckle. "This is something that can only be worked so often, Chet, but the last time was three years ago, before our time. You send a live chicken on test, right? Only something goes wrong and the chicken arrives dead — but edible, of course. Naturally the two Gatekeepers get worried and you send out for more live chickens and we use a different link. Only the next one arrives dead too. This goes on until I have eleven dead chickens, and after that one comes through alive, and we're both relieved we've found the fault and cured it."

"I get it. Okay, you can have your chickens. And I'll sure be glad to get that fishing-rod. The season's just starting here."

THERE the taped conversation ended, for after that the tests had begun and Chet never taped what was said then. Hugh wasn't so careful. He even had his wife with him sometimes. From things which had been said Chet gathered that she was very beautiful, and she certainly had a lovely voice. He would have liked to see a picture of her but had never liked to ask for one in case the request should be misunderstood. He thought of Alice as a friend, like Hugh.

Looking at his watch again, Chet saw that it was barely eight o'clock. Still three and a half hours to go.

These regular tests were more than just routine. MT depended on countless millions of transmitting and receiving links being in perfect register. Every slight deviation had to be detected and corrected at once. Moreover, all the variables — solar interference, gravitic bias, bounce effect, space dust concentration — had to be laboriously plotted and allowed for as they occurred. The Gatekeepers didn't do all the calculations themselves, but they had to make all the adjustments.

It was because of all this that

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it hadn't been possible, when the war started, simply to close down the MT stations for the duration. Unless they were kept in constant register there would be no Gate at the end of the war — merely two vast junkheaps.

So it was necessary that if the Gate was to be preserved, it must be regularly tested and adjusted. But not used, except for the tests. Obviously.

The ringing of Chet's phone bell was a welcome diversion. He snapped the switch and the sentry's voice came through, sounding puzzled. "Guy here with a truck, Gatekeeper," he said. "Apparently passed through the other checkpoints okay. Says something about chickens."

"That's right," said Chet. "I'll be right out."

He walked back through the vast, empty arena. Hugh Hawkins would get his chickens. Chet had arranged the matter so that even if an official inquiry was made, which was unlikely, he'd be in the clear. He would take in only one bird, leaving the others outside the Gate in the care of the sentries. But a little after twelve o'clock he'd be out again, looking agitated, and telling the sentries that there was something wrong, that he'd need some more chickens.

It was strange, Chet thought, that two men like Hugh and himself, who would die if they had to (and they might easily have to) in order to discharge their main responsibility as Gatekeepers, were quite unconcerned about illegally slipping a friend a steel fishing-rod or a dozen chickens.

III

HUGH sipped his wine, made a face, shrugged and drank some more. Catching Alice's eye, he blew her a kiss.

She was sleek and immaculate again, and there was nothing to show that she had so recently been so active in the emotions of love. Indeed, she looked like a wise virgin. The virginal quality in her beauty had always been one of her chief charms, and after ten years of marriage she seemed in no danger of losing it.

They had eaten a fair meal, considering how uninteresting synthetic food generally was. And the wine, poor as it was, was better than no wine at all.

"Chet Blaken offered to send half a dozen cases of wine," Hugh said.

"And you didn't take it?"

"Couldn't very well. How could I carry out half a dozen cases of wine without anybody noticing?"

"If you gave the guards a bottle each they wouldn't notice."

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Hugh shook his head. "Once bribery starts, corruption soon sets in. I told Chet to make it a dozen chickens instead, and we have a story to cover us in case anybody finds out."

"How are you going to carry *them* out?"

"Simple. In the picnic basket."

Alice nodded at the fishing-rod in a canvas case leaning against the wall. "That's for Chet?"

"Yes. We've got a story for that, too."

"I'm sorry for Chet," Alice said quietly. "People don't understand how it is with Gatekeepers. But we've got each other. He's got nobody."

"Huh? What are you talking about, darling?"

"Maybe I get it more than you. People treating me as a sort of enemy, because you're the Gatekeeper. Everybody knows that if you let the army and the navy have their way, the war would be over in a week."

"But there's an agreement . . ."

"*I* know, honey, you don't have to convince me. You and Chet are guardians, to see the Gate isn't used or tampered with, so that it'll still be there when the war's over. And if Singal didn't trust you, or Moka didn't trust Chet, the Gate would just have to be destroyed. But people who have lost sons, daughters, husbands and parents aren't very reasonable. All they can see is that if you let the army send through an atom bomb that would blow up half Singal —"

"If I did, it would be the biggest sell-out in history."

"Of course it would. But don't you see, honey — *I* know all that, I agree with you, I can stand anything that happens because I know we're right. But Chet hasn't got a lovely understanding wife like me."

"I knew it was a mistake to say all those nice things about you."

THEY stopped to listen as a screaming noise far away began as a high whisper and became a shriek. It sounded more like a ship than a shell. Abruptly the scream was cut off and the ground shivered, although the ship must have crashed at least ten miles away.

They said nothing about what they had heard; there was nothing to say.

The phone bell rang. Bronowski's voice said: "Block A was flattened, Gatekeeper. None of the men got out. But we've sewn everything up now, sir. There's no risk of anybody getting through."

Hugh acknowledged the message and put down the instrument. He looked round, puzzled, as he heard Alice gasp.

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Three men stood in the doorway, three men in the dark green uniform of the Mokan Army. One was a general and the other two were colonels. All three had guns covering both Hugh and Alice.

"Stand away from that phone, Hawkins, or I'll shoot your wife dead," the general said harshly.

For the next few minutes Hugh was to curse himself for doing as he was told. If he had picked up the phone Alice would certainly have been shot, and probably himself as well. But the guard force *would* have been alerted, and whatever the raiders had in mind would have failed.

But hope springs eternal in the human breast, and Hugh had stepped away from the phone, hoping that some other way might be found, before he realized that he wasn't going to get such a chance again.

One of the colonels moved between Hugh and the phone. The other moved behind Alice, whose face was ashen.

"I'm General Howth," said the tall, lean-faced man who led the group. "Don't be alarmed, Mrs. Hawkins. We're no renegades. We have the full backing of the Army."

"But not of the government," Hugh said sharply.

"As you say. There are times of extreme emergency when it's necessary to take special powers and bypass the government, Hawkins."

"You're wasting your time," said Hugh. "I presume you have some scheme for using the Gate, and consequently need me. It'll save a lot of trouble if you realize that I'll never co-operate with you, and that nothing you can do will make me."

"Your wife is here, Hawkins," said Howth meaningly.

HUGH shook his head wearily. "Why is it that military chiefs never have any imagination? Why is it they always see only their own side of any problem? General, the Gate cost four hundred million million dollars to install, and it took fifty years to do it. It took thousands of ships, Mokan and Singalese, strung out in space to relay the first transmissions. Thousands of men died before it was working properly. And when the war started, nothing would have been easier, here or on Singal, than to destroy one installation so that the whole colossal, dangerous, expensive, heart-breaking job would have to be done again after the war. Didn't it give you some hope for the human race when the governments of Moka and Singal decided four years ago that even though temporarily we were going to be at war, the

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Gate would be maintained and never used, so that it would still be there when the war was over? Didn't you feel, as I did, that at last human beings were beginning to act like adults instead of maladjusted children?"

Alice turned her eyes to Howth, praying that Hugh's appeal would have some effect. Couldn't he see that what Hugh said was so?

When wars started, soldiers invariably blew up tunnels and bridges and roads that led across and under the defended lines. Naturally. And three or four years later, when the war was over, the bridges and tunnels and roads were rebuilt.

But the Gate, the matter-transmission link between Belcron on Moka and Newlyon on Singal, was something bigger than any tunnel or bridge or road. Bigger, and yet more vulnerable. Obviously neither planet could allow it to be used while the state of war existed. But if it were destroyed — and destruction of that tenuous link would be tragically easy — then when the war was over, as one day it would be over, the vast labor of reconstructing the Gate, and the vast expense, would have to be borne by two wounded, bleeding worlds who were dependent on each other and would always be dependent on each other, even if they quarreled often and occasionally fought.

And it might take another fifty years — fifty years during which there could be no prosperity on either world, not without the Gate. It might, in such circumstances, take more than fifty years. There might never be a Gate again.

So the governments of Moka and Singal had said: Right, we're at war, and the Gate must go into cold storage. But whatever happens, whoever wins and whoever loses, the Gate is going to be needed again. Instead of destroying this wonderful thing that took so long to create, we'll appoint men independent of the war, independent of Moka or Singal, who will maintain the link without ever allowing it to be used for purposes of war. Men who alone, one in Belcron and one in Newlyon, will be able to control the Gate.

Men of such honesty and sincerity and idealism that Moka can trust the Singalese Gatekeeper and Singal can trust the Gatekeeper on Moka.

And since the war began four years ago, the Gate had never been used except for the regular tests operated by the two Gatekeepers. But Moka now had its fifth Gatekeepers and Singal had its seventh. Ten men had been idealistic enough to die for their

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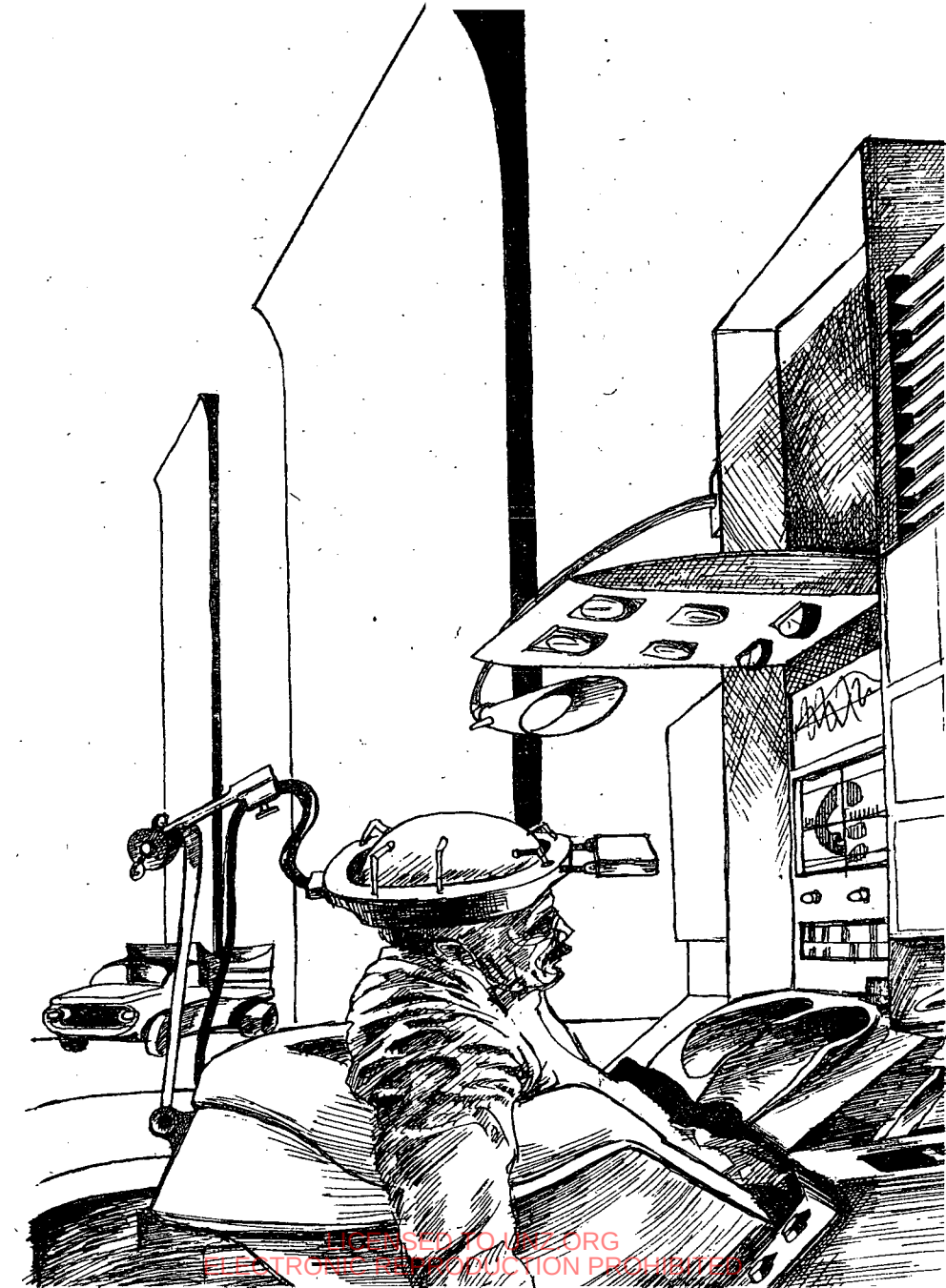

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ideals. And it began to seem that the toll would soon rue.

ALICE'S eyes sought Howth's, and she saw with a stab of pain in her heart that he was quite unmoved by Hugh's appeal.

"Hawkins," Howth said grimly, "we're losing this war. Yet we have a weapon that can win it. An atom bomb through the Gate . . . a battalion of men . . . a flight of bombers . . . a bacteriological onslaught. Five minutes' use of the Gate could win the war for us. And you say —"

"I say it's never going to happen," said Hugh. "General, have you ever heard the name Chet Blaken?"

The General frowned. "Blaken? No."

"He's my colleague, my friend. Chet Blaken is the Gatekeeper at Newlyon. If it weren't for Chet Blaken, an atom bomb would come through our Gate. Or a battalion of men. Or a flight of bombers. Or just tainted air carrying pestilence that would kill us all. But Chet Blaken is so honest that even you thrust him."

"That's where you're wrong. The army believes that we must use the Gate to defeat Singal before Singal uses it to defeat us."

"For Christ's sake, General, use your head! Singal could have done this fiendish thing you want to do any time in the last four years. Six Singalese Gatekeepers have been killed seeing that nobody did."

"This argument is singularly pointless," Howth said coldly. "Hawkins, the Army means to use the Gate."

"And I tell you that it never will."

"You don't understand, Hawkins. You accepted our appearance with commendable coolness. You haven't asked how we got here. Although we took advantage of the raid to get past Block A, we found it necessary to kill the three guards and substitute men of our own. You'll understand from this that we're quite determined."

"You're crazy killers," said Hugh bitterly.

"Please, Hawkins," Howth said, and through his voice came the first hint that he was a man with human feelings, "don't make this any worse than it has to be. You must be aware that we're prepared to cut your wife to pieces before your eyes if necessary. Or if you seem able to bear your wife's pain better than your own, we can demonstrate that you can suffer terrible agony without any possibility of escaping by dying. Please recognize this and act like a reasonable man."

Hugh said nothing. His eyes sought Alice's, and they tried to

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sum up ten happy years together in one final moment together.

IV

CHET unlocked the door and opened it. The three guards were wary but not really suspicious; anything which got past the other checkpoints must be all right. And besides, the small dilapidated livestock truck driven by one old man didn't look as if it need concern them very much.

Their wariness didn't do them any good.

The silent shots from the interior of the truck must have been absolutely simultaneous. The three sentries dropped with hardly a sigh, two of them with their heads blown off and the third with a hole the size of a soup-plate in his chest. Only a second or so later Chet was seized from both sides and bundled back through the door from which he had just emerged.

There were six men in all, dressed in rough, dark clothes and all with cloths over their faces. Alarmed as he was, Chet couldn't help finding this slightly reassuring. The fact that he wesn't to be allowed to see their faces strongly suggested that he was going to be alive afterwards. If he was to meet the same fate as the guards they wouldn't be concerned about whether he'd recognize them again or not.

A short man with sparse fair hair did the talking: "Everything has gone like clockwork, Blaken, so you needn't waste your time thinking you're going to be rescued. The truck will drive back in a few minutes and check out. The guards on the door aren't due to be relieved until two o'clock: So we won't be disturbed."

"Who are you?" Chet demanded. It wasn't a very intelligent question to ask six masked men, but he felt the need to force himself to be bluntly defiant. Now that the crisis had come, he was as scared as he had always feared he would be.

They were marching him back to the control building. One of them ran on ahead to check up.

The short man laughed. He wasn't scared. Indeed, he seemed exultant, as perhaps he had a right to be. A successful raid on the Gate must have been well planned and faultlessly carried through. Chet's request that a livestock truck should be passed through must have been seized on as a heaven-sent opportunity. Chet still didn't see how the truck had been able to get through with six men concealed in it, but that was an academic point, no longer of any great interest. They were here. Perhaps some of the guards

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at the checkpoints had been heavily bribed beforehand.

"You can call me the Peacemaker," the blond man said, "for I'm going to end the war." He chuckled, pleased with himself.

THEY reached the control block and Chet was nudged back into the radio room he had recently left. The man who called himself the Peacemaker had a quick look round. Apparently satisfied, he nodded. Three of the men went out, probably to go to the entrance of the MT area and pose as the sentries who had been murdered.

"You may as well know the situation," the Peacemaker said. "We left a box outside just now. At midnight you will send that box through the Gate to Moka. The instant it arrives, temperature and atmospheric pressure differences will cause it to detonate, spraying bacteria over a large area."

He shrugged. "I grant that if Moka expected this, or learned exactly what had happened within a few minutes, it might be possible to destroy the whole area and nullify our efforts. But Moka won't realize what has happened for some hours. They will be reluctant to destroy the Belcron Gate, and by the time any countermeasures are taken they will be much too late."

"You fool," said Chet contemptuously, and he had the satisfaction of seeing the Peacemaker draw himself up angrily. "You can't do this crazy thing without me, and you certainly can't do it with me."

"You're going to find just what kind of a fool I am," said the other man. Clearly he was an egotist; Chet had touched him on the raw. "Listen. Our organization found out that tonight a heavy Singalese raid is being made on Belcron. We know that the Navy's orders are to destroy as much as possible in the neighborhood of the Gate there without damaging the Gate itself. Knowing this, knowing that there would be chaos in Belcron at this moment, we decided that tonight was the time to win this war. We discovered also that you had given orders that a truck was to be passed through. It was necessary then to —"

"You fool," said Chet again. "I gather you belong to some tinpot so-called patriotic organization? Friends of Singal, Singalese Victory Party, or something of the sort? Don't you think the Government knows what's best for Singal? Of course you don't. Like all crazy fanatics, you —"

"Blaken," said the other furiously, "if you were not necessary to us I'd have you shot as those guards were shot. You're a traitor.

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You want Singal to lose this war."

"Like all fanatics, you see a little bit of the problem and dismiss everything else as unimportant," said Chet. He was finding that so long as he talked as if he wasn't afraid, he almost succeeded in preventing himself from being afraid. "Suppose this insane plan of yours works. The culture you wish to release in Moka will presumably cause an epidemic which will spread over the whole world and into the Mokan Navy. Inevitably, if it is sufficiently virulent to bring Moka to her knees, it will spread here too, and —"

"We have the antidote. Moka hasn't. Everything has been thought of, Blaken."

CHET tried another approach. "Can't you see that Moka and Singal are dependent on each other? That if you weaken Moka, you weaken Singal? When this war ends, as it must end, Singal is going to need Moka!"

The short man spun on his heel. "Number Two, get that syringe ready. Three, hold this old man."

Chet felt a stab of fear again. They were going to drug him, make him incapable of resisting them. His fear made him speak when a braver man would have said nothing.

"I said you were a fool. You're going to drug me with menticol or narco-meryllium. You know that only I can operate the Gate, that only the individual pattern of my brain's impulses will unlock the machines? Without me the Gate is useless. Don't you know that if I am drugged, my brain pattern alters so that even I can't operate the machines?"

The Peacemaker's muffled curse showed that he had heard something of the sort but had hoped that it wasn't true.

Chet already wished that he had stayed silent. True, menticol would damage his brain seriously and probably permanently, but it would have been quick and easy. He could have let them drug him, knowing that although he would soon cease to be aware of what was going on and he might do and say things that would horrify him if he knew about them, he couldn't be made to operate the Gate.

"Go ahead," he said. "Try it. Drug me and see what happens."

"It will have to be the other way," said the man who called himself the Peacemaker. "Do you enjoy pain, Blaken?"

And Chet knew that he was going to need all the courage he could screw up, and more. A fanatic would stop at nothing, because fanatics always knew — *knew* beyond all possibility of

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doubt—that they and they alone were right.

This was what Gatekeepers always feared. That was what Gatekeepers always had to be prepared for. No matter how carefully the Gate was guarded, sooner or later a group of so-called patriots temporarily captured the Gate and its Gatekeeper. This was the seventh time it had happened in four years.

And the other six Gatekeepers had duly died to protect the Gate and the Gate agreement. So the six previous attempts had been abject failures.

But where was Chet Blaken going to get the courage to make the seventh a failure too?

V

NATURALLY Hugh Hawkins didn't suspect for a moment that on Singal Chet Blaken might be going through the same kind of ordeal at exactly the same time. Although at various times and in various ways attempts had been made on both worlds to force the current Gatekeeper to assist in some unofficial or semi-official attempt to bypass the rigid Government control of the Gate, at no time had there ever been simultaneous attempts on both worlds.

Yet the coincidence was not remarkable. It had been the Singalese raid on Belcron which had made the Singalese extremists decide on this particular time for their effort; and it was the Singalese raid on Belcron which allowed General Howth and his Army opportunists to slip into the MT area undetected by the guards.

No one but the gods knew that there was a risk of pestilence from Singal being released on Moka at the same time as an atom bomb from Moka exploded on Singal. The old classical gods, certainly, would have been amused. It was the kind of situation they enjoyed.

Hugh had been shown the bomb. It lay outside in one of the transmission bays, a small, uninteresting object which looked like a two-gallon water can. Despite its unimpressive appearance, it could destroy a quarter of the population of Singal, and more than a quarter of Singal's material resources. Undoubtedly this would be enough to end the war.

"It would be sensible to bow to the inevitable," Howth said.

Hugh shook his head.

Howth turned. "Take the woman outside," he ordered harshly, "and soften her up. Then bring her back and the real business can begin."

A black-browed colonel seized Alice roughly by her belt. When she started to struggle he cuffed

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her hard on each side of the head, heavy blows that buffeted her a foot each way.

Hugh leaped at the colonel. The paralyzing charge from the third man's gun caught him in midair. He collapsed like a sack of potatoes and didn't even see Alice being dragged out.

THERE was no pain; his nerves were temporarily dead. He could see nothing but the floor under his face, so close that his eyes couldn't focus on it. He could hear, however. He heard Alice run, her high heels beating a staccato patter of fear on the concrete. He heard her fall heavily. He heard her scream. He heard sickening noises that sounded like a boot being driven hard into a soft body. He heard Alice sobbing in anguish and, worse, begging and pleading.

The paralyzing charge had been minimal. Hugh was able to squirm within seconds, and as Alice was brought back he was climbing stiffly and awkwardly to his feet.

There was hardly any change in her appearance, apart from the fact that her hair was disordered. But the bloom was off her. She wasn't lovely and assured anymore. Her fear made her look almost ugly, and it was horrible to see her cowering away from the man who had hurt her.

Howth faced Hugh. "Are you going to send that bomb through?"

"No," said Hugh wearily.

Howth looked at his watch. "The Singalese Gatekeeper will expect you to call him in three hours' time. Three hours is a long time. It can be made to seem longer. For the last time, are you going to co-operate, Hawkins?"

"No."

Hugh found himself collapsing again. The man behind him must have paralyzed him. Helpless, he was hauled up, sat on a chair and tied in it. He saw Alice only when his head happened to be turned in her direction.

When they had finished with him, they tied Alice in another chair facing him. Hugh tried to smile at her but couldn't. The paralysis hadn't worn off yet.

Howth's voice was exasperated. "We don't want to do this, Hawkins. We're not enjoying it. But we have to make you send that bomb through. Carry on, Berton."

Berton was enjoying it. Hugh could see that. Slowly, with lascivious pleasure, he cut away Alice's shirt, piece by piece, until she was quite nude above the waist. Hugh writhed in fury when he saw the dark contusions on her ribs, the huge angry red mark on her side.

Berton enjoyed suspense, too. Turning away from Alice, he left

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her like that while he prowled about the room, picking up things and laying them down again. Presently he found something which interested him. It was the metal fishing-rod intended for Chet Blaken. He took out the top section, the thinnest, springiest part of the rod, and tried whipping the air with it experimentally. The swish it made in the air seemed to delight him. He kept cracking the rod viciously and then looking at Alice, who had gone very pale.

"Get on with it, Berton," said Howth harshly.

"Yes, sir."

ALICE closed her eyes as Berton approached her with the rod. A moment later, however, she opened them again, unable to wait passively, unable to pretend that what happened to the pale half-naked body tied in a chair was a matter of no concern to her.

Berton swung with the rod and a fraction of a second later Alice screamed — a raw, agonized scream which showed that the pain was worse than anything she had expected. A straight red line was drawn across her ribs, blood just beginning to ooze from it and spoil the thin, neat line. Berton swung again, and this time the sound of the blow was covered by another scream from Alice; she screamed before the blow landed. Another red line nearly a foot long spurted bright red, across her shoulders this time. There was a gap of an inch or so in the middle. The hollow between her breasts began just there and the steel whip hadn't quite reached the bottom of the cleft.

For the third time Berton struck, and this time Alice hadn't stopped screaming between the strokes. The third long red line was only an inch above her skirt, on the soft flesh of her waist. There was no bone there to protect her, and this time the gash was as deep as a sword-slash. Blood gushed down and tried to hide on her red skirt.

Hugh didn't realize he was going to surrender until he had done so. He never remembered afterwards what he said. He would have said anything to stop what Berton was doing to Alice. After he had said it, whatever it was, he was conscious only of relief as Berton reluctantly stepped back, mingled with horror as Alice slumped in a faint. For a moment Hugh was afraid she was dead.

Howth was speaking, but Hugh didn't listen. All that mattered was that Alice would be hurt no more. He didn't regret his surrender; he only regretted that he had delayed it. Whatever hap-

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pened, even if a miracle somehow saved them both, Alice would carry three terrible scars to her grave.

Whether Hugh would keep his word was another matter altogether. It didn't trouble his conscience that he had told the General he would do as he was told, without having the slightest intention of actually sending an atom bomb through the Gate to Newlyon. Even if he had merely postponed Alice's ordeal for a few hours, that was something.

Of one thing there was no doubt. He couldn't have let Berton beat Alice to death. He would say anything rather than allow that.

Whether he would *do* anything rather than allow that still remained to be seen . . .

IT was 11:25. "Watch him," said the Peacemaker as Chet began to snap switches. "If he does anything but what he said he'd do, let him have it."

Apart from the waiting, Chet hadn't had a bad time. More sensibly, perhaps, than Hugh Hawkins, he had allowed the threat of torture to convince him.

In a way all attempts to coerce a Gatekeeper were futile. In the end, he had to be in sole control of the machines. Whatever had been said and done, whatever he had promised, the question in the end was whether he would betray his trust and save his life or toss his life away and in doing so make all schemes to control him, and through him the Gate, a complete waste of time.

The trouble was, his life was forfeit. Chet knew perfectly well that if he jammed or fused or disoriented the machines so that matter transmission was temporarily impossible, the Peacemaker would not say to him: "Okay, you win. We'll go away and leave you in peace."

Ten other Gatekeepers, faced with something like this situation, had been able to do their duty. Six on Singal and four on Moka. Was he going to add to the list? Or was he to be the first without the courage to guard the Gate with his life?

It was Hugh's turn to speak first this time. But the clock on the wall registered 11:30, and then 11:31, and still no sound emerged from the loudspeaker.

The Peacemaker was impatient. "I thought you said —"

"I told you," Chet explained. "Hawkins began to transmit at 23:30. But we won't hear his voice until nearly 23:35. Wait."

"When he speaks," said the Peacemaker grimly, "do exactly what you always do. Don't think you can outsmart us, Blaken. Don't try talking in code that he'll understand and we don't.

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Unless that case goes through the Gate, you're going to die. Remember that."

Chet nodded. There was no need to act scared. He was scared. Being scared, he could try to act as if he weren't.

At last it came: "Hugh Hawkins, Mokan Gatekeeper. You there, Chet?"

"I'm here, Hugh," Chet said. He knew what to do; the only question was whether he could do it or not. The impulse to postpone the moment was strong — so strong that he knew that if he started postponing, he'd go on postponing.

"This is Chet Blaken, Singalese Gatekeeper. You know my voice, don't you? Well, there are three men here with me. They —"

There were two loud curses, and a shot. Chet Blaken's brains, the only brains in existence which could operate the Singalese Gate, were splashed against the metal case of the radio transmitter.

Chet Blaken hadn't failed after all.

VI

AT Belcron they all had to wait four and a half minutes for Chet's reply. Howth and the two colonels were very careful to say nothing; anything they did or said would be picked up on Singal and the Singalese Gatekeeper would instantly switch off his matter transmitter.

Alice was pale and drawn, wrapped in Hugh's jacket. Howth had let Hugh wash her wounds and bind them up, but they had no opportunity to talk privately. She had tried to talk with her eyes, pleading, despite her fear, despite her desire to live, that whatever he did he wouldn't send the atom bomb through the Gate. Without words she had tried to tell him that although she had screamed, although she had pleaded, she didn't want them to purchase their lives at such a price.

Hugh himself still didn't know what he was going to do. The bomb wasn't going through, that was certain. But exactly how he was going to handle the situation he didn't yet know. Perhaps something Chet said would give him a clue.

Then Chet's voice came. "I'm here, Hugh." A pause. "This is Chet Blaken, Singalese Gatekeeper. You know my voice don't you? Well, there are three men here with me. They —"

They heard other voices cursing, and the sound of a shot. Then silence.

Hugh began to laugh. It was semi-hysteria. There was nothing funny about the death of Chet Blaken, Singalese Gatekeeper,

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his friend. The laughter was shock, not humor.

Howth was slapping him. "Get that bomb through!" he was slapping him. "Get that bomb through!" he was shouting. "Get it through now, before —"

"It's too late," said Hugh, getting control of himself with an effort. "It's much too late. There can't be any matter transmission without Chet, and Chet's dead."

"He may not be dead. What we heard may be —"

"It doesn't matter whether he's dead or not. The microphone was on when you started shouting."

Howth cursed. In his frustration he caught sight of Alice. "Berton!" he snapped.

Hugh didn't wait for the order Howth was going to give. He interrupted quickly, forcing them to listen, to think, to realize that fury at their failure could accomplish nothing.

"Don't you understand? What happened here happened at Newlyon too. There was somebody with Chet, trying to make him do what you were trying to make me do. Don't you understand yet? *Chet Blaken died to save Moka.*"

Howth paused.

It wouldn't have any permanent effect. He was not a man of much imagination. But for an instant he glimpsed something that he had never seen before and would never see again — that there were things more important than victory, even in the middle of a bitter war.

He growled and gestured to the other two. And the next moment they were gone.

Alice threw herself in Hugh's arms, winced with pain and then broke down completely. Hugh wondered if he should phone the guards to warn them that there were men coming out of the MT area, but decided it was unnecessary. Anyone at all, except Hugh or Alice Hawkins, who emerged from the Gate area would be held under heavy guard. Even a general and two colonels.

There would be a court-martial. The three men wouldn't get the death sentence, but they'd get long terms of imprisonment.

Of course they had known that all along, and went ahead anyway. They were patriots.

THAT wasn't the end. The end came three days later.

The Secretary sent for Hugh. Hugh thought nothing about the summons, asuming that the Secretary merely wished to talk about the Howth affair or to inform him of new security arrangements designed to make sure that nothing of the sort could ever happen again. But when he saw the Secretary's face, Hugh knew that the matter was much more important than that.

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"This is in strict confidence, Hawkins," the Secretary said.

"Of course, sir." Although a Gatekeeper was a great and important and valuable person, he naturally addressed the Secretary as "sir."

"Singal is prepared to make peace," said the Secretary.

Hugh jumped to his feet. "That's great news, sir."

"Wait. The terms Singal offers are . . ." He shrugged. "Not good, not bad. Barely acceptable. The point is, Hawkins — this is what I want to consult you about — they say the reason for offering terms concerns the Gate."

"The Gate, sir?"

"It seems . . . I don't pretend to be an expert on these matters, Hawkins. Although the Gate is in my department, there is so much secrecy that . . . However. The Singalese Gatekeeper, as we all know, died defending the Gate. I understand that there are always two deputies available with the necessary knowledge and training, and that in such a case one is selected as the new Gatekeeper and the installation is keyed to his brain pattern."

"That's so, sir."

"The Singalese government tells us that one of these deputies died in a raid a week ago and the other was killed yesterday in a motor accident. They say that there is consequently only one way in which the Gate can be saved. They say they are prepared to make peace so that this thing can be done. What I want to ask you, Hawkins, is this: Is this a Singalese maneuver to gain some advantage, or is what they say likely to be true?"

Hugh was suddenly very happy and very proud. "You can take the Singalese offer at its face value, sir. The only way the Gate can be saved is to appoint one of our deputies here and for me to go to Singal and establish a new Singalese Gatekeeper. That is, unless —" he paused for a moment, the implications of the situation only gradually unfolding themselves to him — "unless both brain locks are removed and the Gate is thrown open again."

"In which case you'd still have to go to Singal?"

"Yes, sir, if the two Singalese deputies are both dead. You see, sir, although before the war there were hundreds of MT officers who could control routine matter transmission, the security measures which were taken at the beginning of the war didn't stop at brain locks keyed to a single Gatekeeper. The method of operation was changed so that at any one time only the Gatekeeper and his two deputies know how to operate the controls. And of course only the Gatekeeper himself can —"

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"I see, I see. So you think Singal's offer is genuine?"

"Yes, sir."

AND two days later, even before the peace was official, Hugh and Alice Hawkins left for Newlyon — by spaceship.

In their private lounge in the ship, Hugh put his arm round her tenderly, being careful not to touch her wounds. Nevertheless, he felt something, or rather, the absence of something, and looked down at her accusingly.

"You've taken off the bandages," he said. "They should still be on."

"I know, honey, but with a figure like mine is it fair to spoil it with bandages?"

She sounded like herself again.

"What are you thinking?" she asked presently. "If anything."

"About Chet. He was always afraid he'd fail if he was ever really tested. Well, he didn't."

"He saved us," said Alice quietly. "You weren't going to send it through, were you?"

"Of course not."

She nodded. "I knew you only promised to stop them . . ." She shuddered uncontrollably for a moment, then went on bravely: "Anyway, Chet saved us."

"He saved more than us, darling. He saved Moka and Singal."

"How do you make that out?"

Hugh was silent for a moment before replying. Then he said: "This is the first time that any two powers fighting a war have ever admitted that there's anything more important than their war. Chet and I both felt that was a great concession. That was one reason why we couldn't let the Gate agreement be broken. Chet's death was the final straw."

"How?"

"It showed that security didn't work and that one of these things had to happen. One, some Gatekeeper wouldn't be such a hero as Chet and the Gate would be used as a weapon of war. Two, the Gate would have to be destroyed. Three, Moka and Singal would have to make peace. Well, the two worlds decided they didn't want One or Two to happen. So there was only Three left."

Alice stirred a little as her wounds itched. "Now there won't be any more Gatekeepers. You're Chief MTO from now on. A pity. There isn't much glamor in that title."

"Hell, didn't I tell you, honey? They're giving me a courtesy title. Poor Chet gets posthumous medals from both Moka and Singal. But I didn't die, so I get a courtesy title instead. They invented it just for me."

"What is it, darling?"

"The Last Gatekeeper."

— J. T. McINTOSH

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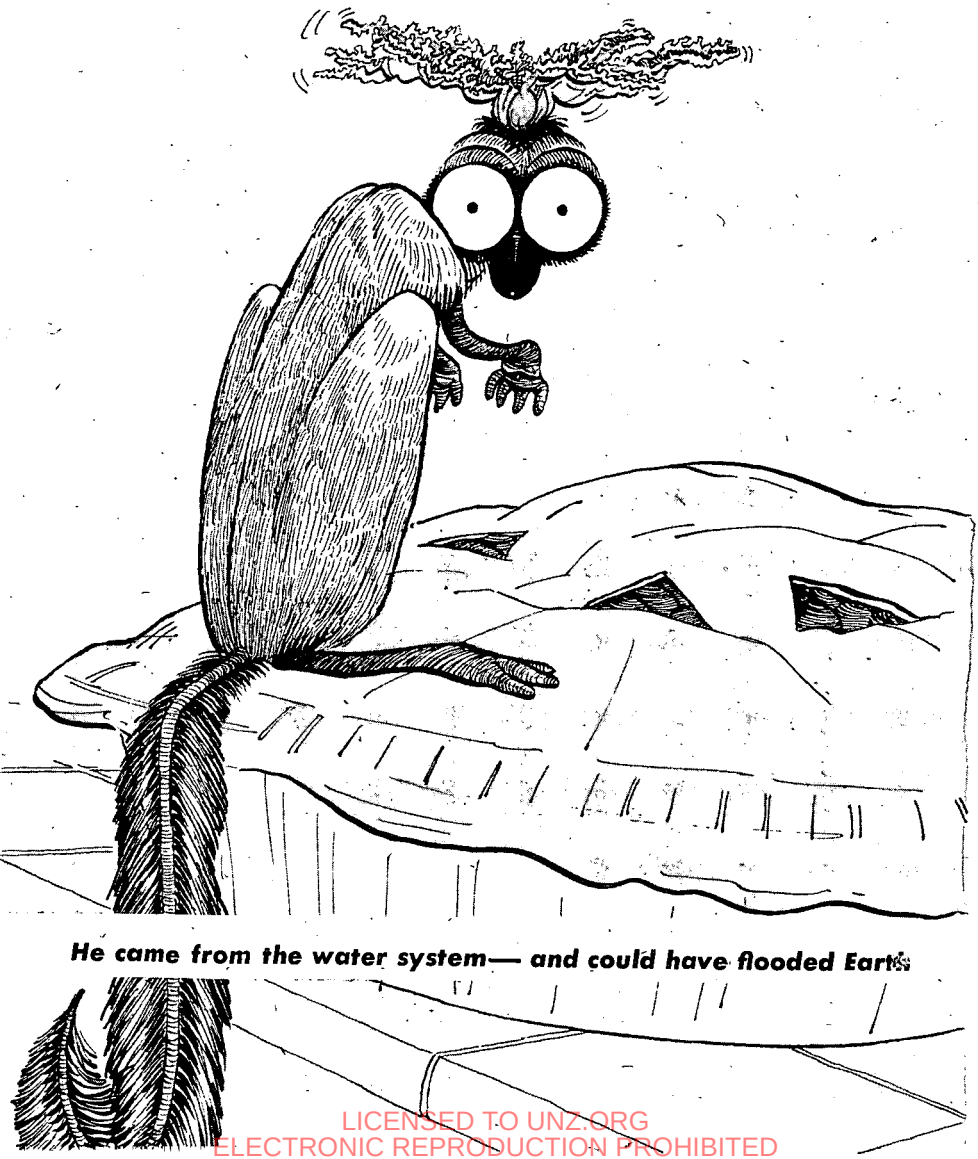
Lochinvar



He came from the water system— and could have flooded Earth

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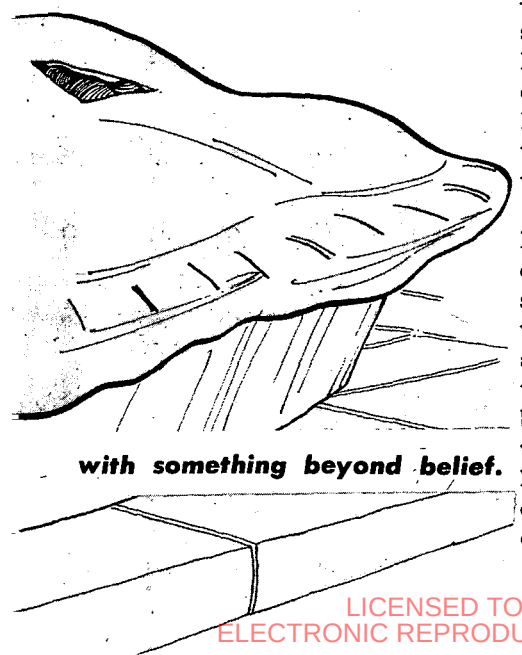
By MARGARET ST. CLAIR

Illustrated by MARTIN



with something beyond belief.

LOCHINVAR — the spelling is only approximate — stuck his head up through the sink drain. It was a good thing Franny had left the basket stopper out of the drain; he would never have been able to lift such a heavy weight.

He listened. His round, intelligent eyes were bright with curiosity. After a moment he expanded the frilly lettuce-green crest on the top of his head that was his organ for distance thought perception. He listened with it too, cocking his head thoughtfully from time to time. He did hope this was going to be a nice place. No quarreling or harsh words.

The atmosphere of the kitchen — freshly baked cherry pie — seemed to reassure him. He put his tiny paws on the edge of the drain hole and levered his limber, celery-talk body up on the porcelain. It took him a long time.

At last he was out. Out, and hungry. The cherry pie, cooling on the counter opposite him, smelled delicious. But his thought organ (Lochinvar was an extremely sensitive receiver, too sensitive for his own comfort, but he couldn't send at all), and the lettuce frill on the top of his head picked up ideas of "Precious" and "Taboo" from the cherry pie. He wasn't, after all,

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intolerably hungry and he didn't want to antagonize anybody. He'd wait.

He bunched his four neat little paws under him, let his undercurved frondy tail hang down into the sink, and composed himself for a nice nap on the rim of the drainboard. He liked the smooth, soft feel of its monel-metal surface. He slept.

Franny, coming in about five to start supper, found him still sleeping there. She gave a startled yip.

Don, in the living room, heard her. He and Franny had been married nearly five years, but he was still a little silly about his wife and probably always would be. He came running in.

"What is it, kid?"

"There on the drainboard." She pointed. "A little green thing."

DON GAVE her a reassuring squeeze and then bent over to look where she was pointing. "It's a — " he said, and stopped. "I don't know what it is," he confessed. "I thought it was some sort of lizard, but it's shaped more like a sea horse. It doesn't look dangerous, anyhow."

Lochinvar had opened his agate eyes and was looking at them. Not for the first time, he wished he had vocal cords. He hoped they wouldn't get scared and start poking at him. Fear wasn't as unpleasant for him to receive as anger and hostility, but it was bad enough.

"It's sort of cute," Franny said after a while. "Those little feet and those big bright eyes and the way its tail hangs down. It seems friendly somehow. Where do you suppose it came from, Don?"

"I can't imagine. Or what it is, for that matter. But, as you say, it's cute."

Franny was still studying Lochinvar. Rather nervously she held out one hand to him.

Lochinvar twitched his tail. Then he gathered his muscles, jumped, and landed accurately on Franny's forefinger. He clung there, using his frondy tail to balance with.

"Be careful!" Don warned. "It might sting you."

"Oh, no. You can't imagine how gently he's holding on with those little bits of paws. Do you suppose he'd like something to eat?"

"I expect so, but what? Too bad he can't indicate his food preferences."

Lochinvar had been waiting for just such an invitation. He hopped off Franny's finger, humped up his back, and took a long, long leap across the kitchen to beside the cherry pie. He looked up at them inquiringly.

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Don's jaw dropped. "He understood me!"

"He wants some of the pie, Don."

"That was for my supper," Don said. "I've been asking you for weeks to make a cherry pie."

"Oh, he'll only eat a tiny piece."

While her husband looked on reproachfully, she cut a sliver of the pie and put it on a saucer. Lochinvar ate daintily, partly nibbling, partly licking, like a cat, with his delicate golden tongue. When he had finished, he hopped on Franny's hand again.

She stroked his head with one fingertip. Her blue eyes were bright with pleasure. "Why, he's covered with fur!" she said, surprised. "That green stuff is as soft as silk."

"I wonder where he came from," Don said.

* * *

THE MARTIAN ambassador, whose visit to Terra was a secret known only to three top-level people, was noticeably worried and distraught.

BY THE end of the next day, Lochinvar had made himself quite at home in the Vennor household. Under the sobriquet of Boopus, he sat on Franny's shoulder as she did her housework, partook daintily of a French apple pie, and appeared to listen attentively to the baseball news on the radio when Don tuned it in.

"He's the nicest pet we ever had," Franny said.

"Um-hum. Practically human, and better-looking than most human beings. Besides being a Giant fan. Listen, kid — "

"Well?"

"About that motorboat — I've been thinking, and I can't see why we have to wait any longer for it."

Franny's ordinarily smooth brow contracted in a frown. "Don, we just can't afford it now. We've been over this a dozen times."

"Why can't we afford it? It only means borrowing a little more money. What am I living for?"

Their voices had begun to rise. Lochinvar looked from Don to Franny anxiously. Were they going to have a quarrel? He hated it so.

"Borrow more money? I want you to have what you want, Don. But this isn't reasonable."

"Damn it, Franny, you're not being reasonable yourself. I — "

Lochinvar felt quite desperate. He must *stop* them. He jumped up and down a couple of times on Franny's shoulder, to attract her attention, and then made a valiant attempt to jump across

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to Don and repeat the performance. He misjudged the distance. He landed with an audible thud on the carpet.

Franny and her husband both hurried to pick him up. As they stooped simultaneously, their heads bumped together. The next minute they were in each other's arms.

"Is Boopus hurt? . . . Go ahead and get the boat, Don. It isn't worth fighting about."

"No, he's okay . . . I can wait for the boat, Franny."

"We'll go shopping for it the middle of next month. I promise, Don. By then the payments for the trip we took to Tahiti will be out of the way . . . Are you *sure* he's all right?"

"I think so." Don was probing Lochinvar's tiny person carefully. "He weighs so little that a fall's not serious for him, the way it would be for a larger creature. Besides, he doesn't act hurt."

This was true enough. Lochinvar, who was feeling extremely relieved, had hopped on to Franny's hand and was looking at them with his usual expression of lovable, amiable intelligence.

"He's so cute!" Franny said, delighted. She added, in one of the understatements of the ages, "He doesn't like it when we quarrel."

THERE IS no tongue, among all the languages of the Galaxy, better suited to the expression of deadly, elaborate, ceremonious insult than High Martian. The messages that Ivvy, the Martian ambassador, was getting from home were so lethally expressive that they made him turn pale and blink his eyes. None the less, what he had to do was so distasteful that he put it off for nearly a day longer. At last he forced himself to the unavoidable interview with the head of the UNBI.

When the UNBI chief realized that Ivvy was serious, he acted. Agents went out. People were interviewed. Trails were followed. And ads appeared in the papers.

* * *

"IT'S CERTAINLY our Boopus," Franny said. She read aloud, "Lost, on July 25th near the spaceport, exotic small green animal with brown eyes. Bushy tail. Very attractive and intelligent. Will finder please call KY 7-0001 *immediately*? Extremely liberal reward."

"That ad must have cost a lot," Don said. "It's a display ad, not in the ordinary lost and found. Somebody wants Boopus back badly." He moved toward the phone on the table.

"What are you going to do?" Franny asked.

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"Call the number, of course."

"Wait." She put out her hand. "I don't want to give him up."

"For a big reward? Franny, you mustn't be unreasonable!"

"What could we buy with the money that would be as nice as he is?"

"Um. Well, he is a Giant fan. But we can't just keep him, when his owner wants him back. That would be stealing."

"Would it? I don't think anyone who's as careless as the owner must be deserves to have him. He'd never have got lost, if his owner had taken proper care of him."

"Well . . . " Don said indecisively.

The crest on Lochinvar's head was vibrating furiously. These people liked him and didn't want to give him up. Fine. He liked them too. But they'd quarreled once before, and he'd barely been able to stop them. If they quarreled again, anything might happen. He wouldn't be able to help himself.

Lochinvar had no vocal cords, but in moments of intense emotion he was able to swallow air and emit a grumbling noise. He did this now.

When he saw that Franny and Don were both looking at him, he hopped over to the phone and sat down on it. Once more he made the grumbling noise.

Franny sighed. She ran one hand unhappily through her long blonde hair. "Go ahead and call," she said. "He wants you to."

IVVY, IN A limousine driven by a grim-faced UNBI man, arrived somewhat later. His eyes were anxious and his lips, as he pressed the front door buzzer, were white. Nobody knew better than he what Lochinvar's possibilities were — possibilities that, for all their comic aspects, were apt to end tragically.

Franny opened the door. " 'Lo," she said muzzily. "Nize day." She giggled. "You the man about the ad?"

What Ivvy had been afraid would happen obviously had been happening. Fortunately, it didn't seem to have gone very far. "Yes, I have come for the little animal," he answered. "Do I see him on your shoulder?"

"Sure," Franny answered. "Boopus." She lowered her voice confidentially. "He's all stiff."

"Oh, my," said Ivvy. That must mean Lochinvar had been rebroadcasting for quite a while. "Oh, dear."

He produced a transparent globe that looked like plastic but was, in actual fact, made of kaointh — a word that, in Martian, means "impervious to neural force."

"Excuse me," he said to

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Franny. A little unsteadily — for by now Ivvy was feeling the effect of Lochinvar's involuntary transmission himself — he reached across to the girl, plucked Lochinvar from her shoulder, and dropped him tenderly through the opening in the kaointh globe. He closed the opening.

He drew a long breath. "Ah," he said, "I am finally much relieved."

Franny had been watching vacantly. Now she rubbed one hand over her face. "Relieved? Oh, I see. You were afraid somebody might hurt him. I see."

She didn't see at all, but Ivvy found no reason for enlightening her. He followed her into the living room, holding the kaointh globe. He put the globe down on the cocktail table and began shelling out what was, precisely as the ad had said, an extremely liberal reward.

Don had been sitting on the floor, looking bewilderedly at an unsteady tower he had apparently been building out of dominoes. Now he scrambled to his feet and shut the radio off.

Ivvy began putting the money in his hand. Don accepted without enthusiasm. He had liked Lochinvar and he felt, just as Franny did, that there was something odd and unsatisfactory about the transaction.

"How did the animal happen to get lost?" he asked.

Ivvy's plump lips worked, but no sound came out. What point was there in relating to these Earth people the series of fantastic mishaps that had ended in Lochinvar's getting out of his protective case and being dropped into one of the city's reservoirs as Ivvy and his VIP hosts chanced to fly over it in a 'copter?

"He got into the water system by mistake," he said at last.

"Oh."

Ivvy put his wallet away. "You were listening to the radio?" he asked.

"Yes." Don's good-humored face grew sour. "Giants are losing again," he said bitterly. "Every year they start out fine, every year they manage to foul it up. Makes my blood really boil."

Ivvy nodded. What had happened was obvious. This Earthman's angry thoughts had grown too much for Lochinvar to absorb, and the wretched animal had begun re-emitting them involuntarily.

Fortunately Ivvy had arrived in time.

HE MOVED toward the door. Franny followed him. "He was the nicest pet we ever had," she said wistfully. "We

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hate to let him go. You'll be good to him?"

Once more the ambassador's face worked. This woman didn't realize — and, if he had his way, never would realize — that she and her husband had been harboring one of the fabulous Gryna animals.

The Gryna animal's peculiar mental abilities run like a parti-colored thread through Martian history. Time and again whole cities have been betrayed to the enemy by the surreptitious conveying of a Gryna, minus its protective case, into their citadels. The animal itself is harmless, well-meaning and intelligent. But when it receives a certain quantum of hostile thought impulses from the human around it, it involuntarily re-emits them. It re-emits them transformed into a monumental, paralyzing euphoria.

The first stages of this are not so bad — rather like the happy phase of a drinking bout. Franny and Don had been at this stage when Ivvy came for Lochinvar. It is a stage of muzziness and block-building. But as the euphoria continues, it grows dangerous. Those within the radius of its effects are capable of walking off a cliff to see what is at the bottom, or putting their hands into a glowing furnace to pat the pretty flames. And a beleaguered city will open its gates to its enemies, saying happily, "Do come in."

"I said we hate to let him go," Franny repeated a little insistently. "He has such a gentle nature. He hated it when we quarreled."

Ivvy licked his lips. He thought of the incredulity that had come into the UNBI chief's face when Ivvy had tried to tell him that Lochinvar was an ordinary precaution of Martian diplomacy. He thought of the worsening of high-level Mars-Terra relations that was bound to result. He thought of what would have happened if Lochinvar had received enough hostile thoughts to get him really going before Ivvy reclaimed him. He thought of his own blasted career as a diplomat.

But the code of Martian politeness is a compelling one. Ivvy forced his stiff face into a smile. "Yes, I'll be kind to him," he told Franny truthfully. "As you say, he responds badly to harsh words."

— MARGARET ST. CLAIR

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THE GOD NEXT DOOR

By BILL DOEDE Illustrated by IVIE

STINSON lay still in the sand where he fell, gloating over the success of his arrival.

He touched the pencil-line scar behind his ear where the cylinder was buried, marveling at the power stored there, power to fling him from earth to this fourth planet of the Centaurian system in an instant. It had happened so fast that he could almost feel the warm, humid Missouri air, though he was light years from Missouri.

He got up. A gray, funnel-shaped cloud of dust stood off to his left. This became disturbing, since there was scarcely enough wind to move his hair. He watched it, trying to recall what he might know about cyclones. But he knew little. Weather control made cyclones and other cli-

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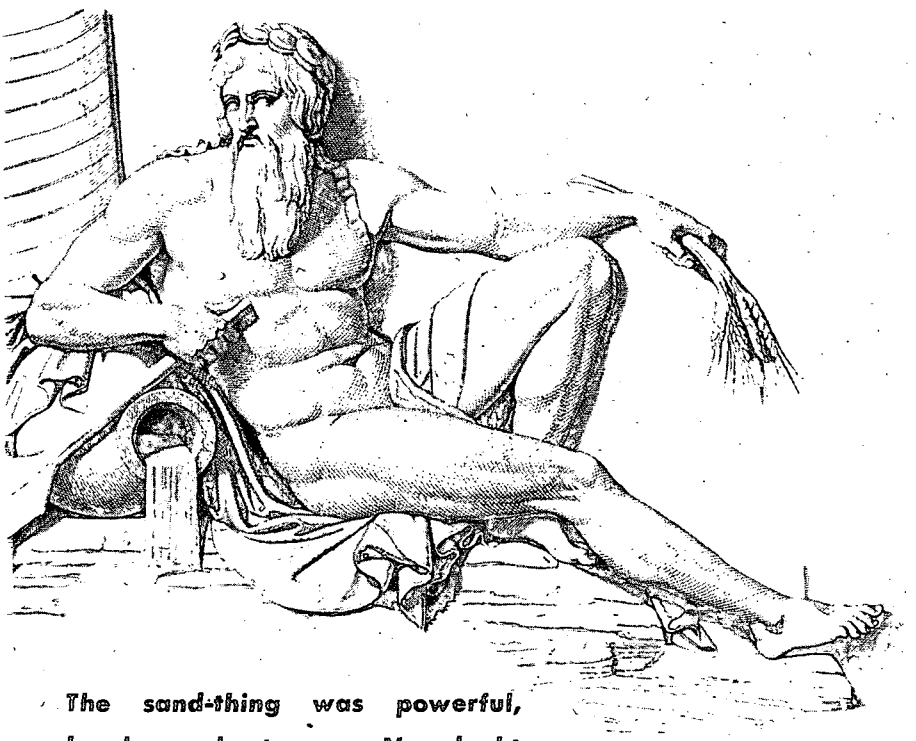

The sand-thing was powerful, lonely and strange. No doubt it was a god — but who wasn't?

matic phenomena on earth practically non-existent. The cloud did not move, though, except to spin on its axis rapidly, emitting a high-pitched, scarcely audible whine, like a high speed motor. He judged it harmless.

He stood on a wide valley floor between two mountain ranges. Dark clouds capped one peak of the mountains on his left. The sky was deep blue.

He tested the gravity by jumping up and down. Same as Earth gravity. The sun — no, not *the* sun. Not Sol. What should he call it, Alpha or Centaurus? Well, perhaps neither. He was here and Earth was somewhere up there. This was *the* sun of this particular solar system. He was right the first time.

The sun burned fiercely, although he would have said it was

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about four o'clock in the afternoon, if this had been Earth. Not a tree, nor a bush, nor even a wisp of dry grass was in sight. Everywhere was desert.

The funnel of sand had moved closer and while he watched it, it seemed to drift in the wind — although there was no wind. Stinson backed away. It stopped. It was about ten feet tall by three feet in diameter at the base. Then Stinson backed away again. It was changing. Now it became a blue rectangle, then a red cube, a violet sphere.

He wanted to run. He wished Benjamin were here. Ben might have an explanation. "What am I afraid of?" he said aloud, "a few grains of sand blowing in the wind? A wind devil?"

He turned his back and walked away. When he looked up the wind devil was there before him. He looked back. Only one. It had moved. The sun shone obliquely, throwing Stinson's shadow upon the sand. The wind devil also had a shadow, although the sun shone through it and the shadow was faint. But it moved when the funnel moved. This was no illusion.

Again Stinson felt the urge to run, or to use the cylinder to project himself somewhere else, but he said, "No!" very firmly to himself. He was here to investigate, to determine if this planet was capable of supporting life.

Life? Intelligence? He examined the wind devil as closely as he dared, but it was composed only of grains of sand. There was no core, no central place you could point to and say, here is the brain, or the nervous system. But then, how could a group of loosely spaced grains of sand possibly have a nervous system?

It was again going through its paces. Triangle, cube, rectangle, sphere. He watched, and when it became a triangle again, he smoothed a place in the sand and drew a triangle with his forefinger. When it changed to a cube he drew a square, a circle for a sphere, and so on. When the symbols were repeated he pointed to each in turn, excitement mounting. He became so absorbed in doing this that he failed to notice how the wind devil drew closer and closer, but when he inhaled the first grains of sand, the realization of what was happening dawned with a flash of fear. Instantly he projected himself a thousand miles away.

NOW he was in an area of profuse vegetation. It was twilight. As he stood beside a small creek, a chill wind blew from the northwest. He wanted to cover himself with the long leaves he found, but they were dry and

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brittle, for here autumn had turned the leaves. Night would be cold.

He was not a woodsman. He doubted if he could build a fire without matches. So he followed the creek to where it flowed between two great hills. Steam vapors rose from a crevice. A cave was nearby and warm air flowed from its mouth. He went inside.

At first he thought the cave was small, but found instead that he was in a long narrow passageway. The current of warm air flowed toward him and he followed it, cautiously, stepping carefully and slowly. Then it was not quite so dark. Soon he stepped out of the narrow passageway into a great cavern with a high-vaulted ceiling.

The light source was a mystery. He left no shadow on the floor. A great crystal sphere hung from the ceiling, and he was curious about its purpose, but a great pool of steaming water in the center of the cavern drew his attention. He went close, to warm himself. A stone wall surrounding the pool was inscribed with intricate art work and indecipherable symbols.

Life. Intelligence. The planet was inhabited.

Should he give up and return to earth? Or was there room here for his people? Warming his hands there over the great steaming pool he thought of Benjamin, and Straus, and Jamieson — all those to whom he had given cylinders, and who were now struggling for life against those who desired them.

He decided it would not be just, to give up so easily.

The wide plaza between the pool and cavern wall was smooth as polished glass. Statues lined the wall. He examined them.

The unknown artist had been clever. From one angle they were animals, from another birds, from a third they were vaguely humanoid creatures, glowering at him with primitive ferocity. The fourth view was so shocking he had to turn away quickly. No definable form or sculptured line was visible, yet he felt, or saw—he did not know which senses told him—the immeasurable gulf of a million years of painful evolution. Then nothing. It was not a curtain drawn to prevent him from seeing more.

There was no more.

HE stumbled toward the pool's wall and clutched for support, but his knees buckled. His hand slid down the wall, over the ancient inscriptions. He sank to the floor. Before he lost consciousness he wondered, fleetingly, if a lethal instrument was in the statue.

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He woke with a ringing in his ears, feeling drugged and sluggish. Sounds came to him. He opened his eyes.

The cavern was crowded. These creatures were not only humanoid, but definitely human, although more slight of build than earth people. The only difference he could see at first sight was that they had webbed feet. All were dressed from the waist down only, in a shimmering skirt that sparkled as they moved. They walked with the grace of ballet dancers, moving about the plaza, conversing in a musical language with no meaning for Stinson. The men were dark-skinned, the women somewhat lighter, with long flowing hair, wide lips and a beauty that was utterly sensual.

He was in chains! They were small chains, light weight, of a metal that looked like aluminum. But all his strength could not break them.

They saw him struggling. Two of the men came over and spoke to him in the musical language.

"My name is Stinson," he said, pointing to himself. "I'm from the planet Earth."

They looked at each other and jabbered some more.

"Look," he said, "Earth. E-A-R-T-H, Earth." He pointed upward, described a large circle, then another smaller, and showed how Earth revolved around the sun.

One of the men poked him with a stick, or tube of some kind. It did not hurt, but angered him. He left the chains by his own method of travel, and reappeared behind the two men. They stared at the place where he had been. The chains tinkled musically. He grasped the shoulder of the offender, spun him around and slapped his face.

A cry of consternation rose from the group, echoing in the high ceilinged cavern. "SBTL!" it said, "ZBTL . . . XBTL . . . zbtl."

The men instantly prostrated themselves before him. The one who had poked Stinson with the stick rose, and handed it to him. Still angered, Stinson grasped it firmly, with half a notion to break it over his head. As he did so, a flash of blue fire sprang from it. The man disappeared. A small cloud of dust settled slowly to the floor.

Disintegrated!

Stinson's face drained pale, and suddenly, unaccountably, he was ashamed because he had no clothes.

"I didn't mean to kill him!" he cried. "I was angry, and . . ."

Useless. They could not understand. For all he knew, they might think he was threatening them. The object he had thought of as a stick was in reality a

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long metal tube, precisely machined, with a small button near one end.

This weapon was completely out of place in a culture such as this. Or was it? What did he know of these people? Very little. They were humanoid. They had exhibited human emotions of anger, fear and, that most human of all characteristics, curiosity. But up to now the tube and the chain was the only evidence of an advanced technology, unless the ancient inscriptions in the stone wall of the pool, and the statues lining the wall were evidences.

THERE was a stirring among the crowd. An object like a pallet was brought, carried by four of the women. They laid it at his feet, and gestured for him to sit. He touched it cautiously, then sat.

Instantly he sprang to his feet. There, at the cavern entrance, the wind devil writhed and undulated in a brilliant harmony of colors. It remained in one spot, though, and he relaxed somewhat.

One of the women came toward him, long golden hair flowing, firm breasts dipping slightly at each step. Her eyes held a language all their own, universal. She pressed her body against him and bore him to the pallet, her kisses fire on his face.

Incongruously, he thought of Benjamin back on earth, and all the others with cylinders, who might be fighting for their lives at this moment. He pushed her roughly aside.

She spoke, and he understood! Her words were still the same gibberish, but now he knew their meaning. Somehow he knew also that the wind devil was responsible for his understanding.

"You do not want me?" she said sadly. "Then kill me."

"Why should I kill you?"

She shrugged her beautiful shoulders. "It is the way of the Gods," she said. "If you do not, then the others will."

He took the tube-weapon in his hands, careful not to touch the button. "Don't be afraid. I didn't mean to kill the man. It was an accident. I will protect you."

She shook her head. "One day they will find me alone, and they'll kill me."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "I have not pleased you."

"On the contrary, you have. There is a time and place for everything, though."

Suddenly a great voice sounded in the cavern, a voice with no direction. It came from the ceiling, the floor, the walls, the steaming pool. It was in the language of the web-footed people;

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it was in his own tongue. "No harm must come to this woman. The God with fingers on his feet has decreed this."

Those in the cavern looked at the woman with fear and respect. She kissed Stinson's feet. Two of the men came and gave her a brilliant new skirt. She smiled at him, and he thought he had never seen a more beautiful face.

THE GREAT, bodiless voice sounded again, but those in the cavern went about their activities. They did not hear.

"Who are you?"

Stinson looked at the wind devil, since it could be no one else speaking, and pointed to himself. "Me?"

"Yes."

"I am Stinson, of the planet Earth."

"Yes, I see it in your mind, now. You want to live here, on this planet."

"Then you must know where I came from, and how."

"I do not understand how. You have a body, a physical body composed of atoms. It is impossible to move a physical body from one place to another by a mere thought and a tiny instrument, yet you have done so. You deserted me out in the desert."

"I deserted you?" Stinson cried angrily, "You tried to kill me!"

"I was attempting communica-

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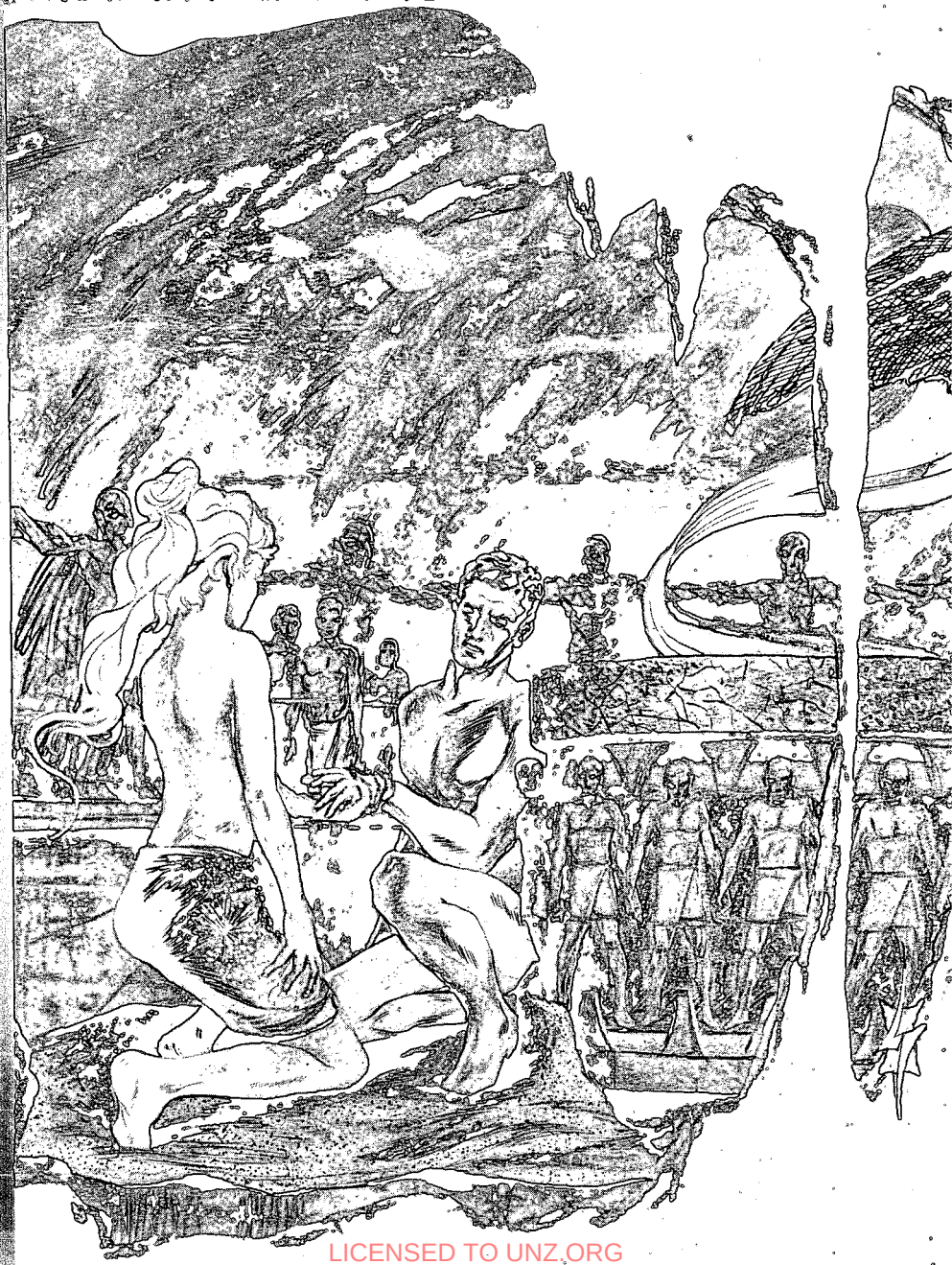

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tion. Why should I kill you?"

He was silent a moment, looking at the people in the cavern. "Perhaps because you feared I would become the God of these people in your place."

Stinson felt a mental shrug. "It is of no importance. When they arrived on this planet I attempted to explain that I was not a God, but the primitive is not deeply buried in them. They soon resorted to emotion rather than reason. It is of no importance."

"I'd hardly call them primitive, with such weapons."

"The tube is not of their technology. That is, they did not make it directly. These are the undersirables, the incorrigibles, the nonconformists from the sixth planet. I permit them here because it occupies my time, to watch them evolve."

"You should live so long."

"Live?" the wind devil said. "Oh, I see your meaning. I'd almost forgotten. You are a strange entity. You travel by a means even I cannot fully understand, yet you speak of time as if some event were about to take place. I believe you think of death. I see your physical body has deteriorated since yesterday. Your body will cease to exist, almost as soon as those of the sixth planet peoples. I am most interested in you. You will bring your people, and live here."

"I haven't decided. There are these web-footed people, who were hostile until they thought I was a God. They have destructive weapons. Also, I don't understand you. I see you as a cone of sand which keeps changing color and configuration. Is it your body? Where do you come from? Is this planet populated with your kind?"

The wind devil hesitated.

"Where do I originate? It seems I have always been. You see this cavern, the heated pool, the statues, the inscriptions. Half a million years ago my people were as you. That is, they lived in physical bodies. Our technology surpassed any you have seen. The tube these webfoots use is a toy by comparison. Our scientists found the ultimate nature of physical law. They learned to separate the mind from the body. Then my people set a date. Our entire race was determined to free itself from the confines of the body. The date came."

"What happened?"

"I do not know. I alone exist. I have searched all the levels of time and matter from the very beginning. My people are gone. Sometimes it almost comes to me, why they are gone. And this is contrary to the greatest law of all—that an entity, once in existence, can never cease to exist."

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STINSON was silent, thinking of the endless years of searching through the great gulf of time. His eyes caught sight of the woman, reclining now on the pallet. The men had left her and stood in groups, talking, glancing at him, apparently free of their awe and fear already.

The woman looked at him, and she was not smiling. "Please ask the Sand God," she said, "to speak to my people again. Their fear of him does not last. When He is gone they will probably kill us."

"As for the webfoots," the wind devil, or Sand God, said, "I will destroy them. You and your people will have the entire planet."

"Destroy them?" Stinson asked, incredulously, "all these people? They have a right to live like any one else."

"Right? What is it — 'right?' They are entities. They exist, therefore they always will. My people are the only entities who ever died. To kill the body is unimportant."

"No. You misunderstand. Listen, you spoke of the greatest law. Your law is a scientific hypothesis. It has to do with what comes after physical existence, not with existence itself. The greatest law is this, that an entity, once existing, must not be harmed in any way. To do so changes the most basic structure of nature."

The Sand God did not reply. The great bodiless, directionless voice was silent, and Stinton felt as if he had been taken from some high place and set down in a dark canyon. The cone of sand was the color of wood ashes. It pulsed erratically, like a great heart missing a beat now and then. The web-footed people milled about restlessly. The woman's eyes pleaded.

When he looked back, the Sand God was gone.

Instantly a new note rose in the cavern. The murmur of unmistakable mob fury ran over the webfoots. Several of the men approached the woman with hatred in their voices. He could not understand the words now.

But he understood her. "They'll kill me!" she cried.

Stinson pointed the disintegrating weapon at them and yelled. They dropped back. "We'll have to get outside," he told her. "This mob will soon get out of hand. Then the tube won't stop them. They will rush in. I can't kill them all at once, even if I wanted to. And I don't."

Together they edged toward the cavern entrance, ran quickly up the inclined passageway, and came out into crisp, cold air. The morning sun was reflected from a million tiny mirrors on

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the rocks, the trees and grass. A silver thaw during the night had covered the whole area with a coating of ice. Stinson shivered. The woman handed him a skirt she had thoughtfully brought along from the cavern. He took it, and they ran down the slippery path leading away from the entrance. From the hiding place behind a large rock they watched, as several web-footed men emerged into the sunlight. They blinked, covered their eyes, and jabbered musically among themselves. One slipped and fell on the ice. They re-entered the cave.

STINSON donned the shimmering skirt, smiling as he did so. The others should see him now. Benjamin and Straus and Jamieson. They would laugh. And Ben's wife, Lisa, she would give her little-girl laugh, and probably help him fasten the skirt. It had a string, like a tobacco pouch, which was tied around the waist. It helped keep him warm.

He turned to the woman. "I don't know what I'll do with you, but now that we're in trouble together, we may as well introduce ourselves. My name is Stinson."

"I am Sybtl," she said.

"Syb-tl." He tried to imitate her musical pronunciation. "A very nice name."

She smiled, then pointed to the cavern. "When the ice is gone, they will come out and follow us."

"We'd better make tracks."

"No," she said, "we must run, and make no tracks."

"Okay, Sis," he said.

"Sis?"

"That means, sister."

"I am not your sister. I am your wife."

"What?"

"Yes. When a man protects a woman from harm, it is a sign to all that she is his chosen. Otherwise, why not let her die? You are a strange God."

"Listen, Sybtl," he said desperately, "I am not a God and you are not my wife. Let's get that straight."

"But . . ."

"No buts. Right now we'd better get out of here."

He took her hand and they ran, slid, fell, picked themselves up again, and ran. He doubted the wisdom of keeping her with him. Alone, the webfoots were no match for him. He could travel instantly to any spot he chose. But with Sybtl it was another matter; he was no better than any other man, perhaps not so good as some because he was forty, and never had been an athlete.

How was he to decide if this planet was suitable for his people, hampered by a woman, slinking

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through a frozen wilderness like an Indian? But the woman's hand was soft. He felt strong knowing she depended on him.

Anyway, he decided, pursuit was impossible. They left no tracks on the ice. They were safe, unless the webfoots possessed talents unknown to him.

So they followed the path leading down from the rocks, along the creek with its tumbling water. Frozen, leafless willows clawed at their bodies. The sun shone fiercely in a cloudless sky. Already water ran in tiny rivulets over the ice. The woman steered him to the right, away from the creek.

STINSON'S bare feet were numb from walking on ice. Christ, he thought, what am I doing here, anyway? He glanced down at Sybtl and remembered the webfoots. He stopped, tempted to use his cylinder and move to a warmer, less dangerous spot.

The woman pulled on his arm. "We must hurry!"

He clutched the tube-weapon. "How many shots in this thing?"

"Shots?"

"How often can I use it?"

"As often as you like. It is good for fifty years. Kaatr—he is the one you destroyed—brought it from the ship when we came. Many times he has used it unwisely."

"When did you come?"

"Ten years ago. I was a child."

"I thought only criminals were brought here."

She nodded. "Criminals, and their children."

"When will your people come again?"

She shook her head. "Never. They are no longer my people. They have disowned us."

"And because of me even those in the cavern have disowned you."

Suddenly she stiffened beside him. There, directly in their path, stood the Sand God. It was blood red now. It pulsed violently. The great voice burst forth.

"Leave the woman!" it demanded angrily. "The webfoots are nearing your position."

"I cannot leave her. She is helpless against them."

"What form of primitive stupidity are you practicing now? Leave, or they will kill you."

Stinson shook his head.

The Sand God pulsed more violently than before. Ice melted in a wide area around it. Brown, frozen grass burned to ashes.

"You will allow them to kill you, just to defend her life? What business is it of yours if she lives or dies? My race discarded such primitive logic long before it reached your level of development."

"Yes," Stinson said, "and your race no longer exists."

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The Sand God became a sphere of blue flame. A wave of intense heat drove them backward. "Earthman," the great voice said, "go back to your Earth. Take your inconsistencies with you. Do not come here again to infect my planet with your primitive ideas. The webfoots are not as intelligent as you, but they are sane. If you bring your people here, I shall destroy you all."

The sphere of blue fire screamed away across the frozen wilderness, and the thunder of its passing shook the ground and echoed among the lonely hills.

SYBTL shivered against his arm. "The Sand God is angry," she said. "My people tell how he was angry once before, when we first came here. He killed half of us and burned the ship that brought us. That is how Kaatr got the tube-weapon. It was the only thing the Sand God didn't burn, that and the skirts. Then, when he had burned the ship, the Sand God went to the sixth planet and burned two of the largest cities, as a warning that no more of us must come here."

Well, Stinson said to himself, that does it. We are better off on Earth. We can't fight a monster like him.

Sybtl touched his arm. "Why did the Sand God come? He did not speak."

"He spoke to me."

"I did not hear."

"Yes, I know now. His voice sounds like thunder in the sky, but it is a voice that speaks only in the mind. He said I must leave this planet."

She glanced at him with suddenly awakened eyes, as if thinking of it for the first time. "Where is your ship?"

"I have no ship."

"Then he will kill you." She touched her fingers on his face. "I am sorry. It was all for me."

"Don't worry. The Sand God travels without a ship, why shouldn't I?"

"Now?"

"As soon as you are safe. Come."

Steam rose from the burned area, charred like a rocket launching pit. They stepped around it carefully. Stinson felt warm air, but there was no time, now, to warm cold feet or dwell on the vagaries of Sand Gods.

Together they crossed the narrow valley. Sybtl led him toward a tall mound of rock. Here they came to the creek again, which flowed into a small canyon. They climbed the canyon wall. Far away, small figures moved. The webfoots were on their trail.

She drew him into a small cave. It was heated, like the great cavern, but held no walled pool nor mysterious lighting. But

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it was warm, and the small entrance made an excellent vantage point for warding off attack.

"They will not find us . . ."

A high-pitched keening burst suddenly around them. Stinson knew they had heard, or felt the sound for some time, that now its frequency was in an audible range.

"The Sand God," Sybtl said. "Sometimes he plays among the clouds. He makes it rain in a dry summer, or sometimes warms the whole world for days at a time in winter, so the snow melts and the grass begins to green. Then he tires and lets winter come back again. He is the loneliest God in the universe."

"What makes you think he's lonely?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I just know. But he's an angry God now. See those clouds piling in the East? Soon they will hide the sun. Then he will make them churn and boil, like river whirlpools in spring. At least he does this when he plays. Who knows what he will do when he's angry?"

"The Sand God isn't doing this," Stinson said. "It's only a storm."

She covered his lips with her fingers. "Don't say that. He may hear you and be more angry."

"But it is, don't you see? You give him powers he does not possess."

Sybtl shook her head and stroked his face with her long, slim fingers. "Poor little God-with-fingers-on-his-feet," she said. "You do not understand. The Sand God is terrible, even when he plays. See the lightning? It is blue. The lightning of a storm that comes by itself is not blue. He is running around the world on feet like the rockets of space ships, and when he strikes the clouds, blue fire shoots away."

THE CLOUDS continued to build on one another. Soon the blue flashes of lightning extended across the sky from horizon to horizon. The earth trembled. Sybtl moved closer, trembling also.

"He never did this before," she said. "He never made the earth shake before."

Great boulders crashed down the canyon walls and dropped into the creek. They dared not move from the cave, although death seemed certain if they stayed.

"I'll leave for a moment," he said. "I'll be back soon."

"You're leaving?" There was panic in her voice.

"Only for a moment."

"And you won't come back. You will go to your world."

"No. I'll be back."

"Promise? No, don't promise. The promises of Gods often are

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forgotten before the sounds die away."

"I'll be back."

He disappeared at once, giving her no chance to object again, and went to the desert of sand, where he had first arrived on the planet. He wanted to see if the storm were world-wide.

Stinson had never been in a sand storm before, even on Earth. He could not breathe. He could not see. Bullets of sand stung his skin. Bullets of sand shot into his eyes. Clouds of sand howled around him. He fell, and the wind rolled him over and over in the sand like a tumbleweed. The skirt flew up around his face. He could not get up again.

He returned to the cave.

Soon after, while they sat huddled together, watching the chaos of tumbling rocks, lightning, and driving rain, the high-pitched keening came again. A sphere of blue fire appeared in the east. Its brilliance put the lightning to shame. It bore down on the cave swiftly, purposefully. Stinson prepared himself to leave. In spite of his desire to protect Sybtl, it was useless to get himself killed when he was powerless to help her. But at the last moment it veered off.

"Fiend!" Stinson screamed the word, vaguely marvelling at his own fury.

The blue sphere turned and came back.

"Monster!"

Again.

"Murderer!"

"Adolescent!"

This time it kept going. The rain and wind ceased. Lightning stopped. Thunder rumbled distantly. Clouds disappeared. Stinson and Sybtl emerged from the cave.

There was no longer a question of attack from the webfoots, the storm had taken care of that. The fierce sun began its work of drying rocks and throwing shadows and coaxing life out into the open again. Down in the canyon a bird sang, a lonely, cheerful twitter.

"The Sand God is tired," Sybtl said. "He is not angry now. I'm glad. Perhaps he will let you stay."

"No. Even if he allowed it, I couldn't stay. My people could never live here with a God who is half devil."

THE CONE of sand suddenly appeared. It stood in the canyon, its base on a level with the cave. It was quiet. It was dull gray in color. It exuded impressions of death, of hopeful words solemnly spoken over lowered coffins, of cold earth and cold space, of dank, wet catacombs, of creeping, crawling nether things.

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The bird's twitter stopped abruptly.

"Earthman," the Sand God said, as if he were about to make a statement.

Stinson ignored him. He glanced down at Sybtl, who sensed that this was a time for good-bys. He thought, perhaps I can stay here alone with her. The webfoots might find us, or the Sand God might destroy us in one of his fits, but it might be worth it.

"Don't go," she said. "Not yet."

"Earthman, hear me."

"I hear you."

"Why does your mind shrink backward?"

"I've decided not to bring my people here."

"*You* decided?"

"Certainly," Stinson said boldly. "Call it rationalization, if you wish. You ordered us away; and I have several good reasons for not coming here if the door was open."

"I've changed my mind. You will be welcomed."

"Listen to that, will you?" Stinson said angrily. "Just listen! You set yourself up as a God for the webfoots. You get them eating out of your hand. Then what do you do? You throw a fit. Yes, a fit! Like an adolescent. Worse."

"Earthman, wait . . ."

"No!" Stinson shot back. "You've owned this planet for a million years. You have brooded here alone since before my people discovered fire, and in all those ages you never learned self-control. I can't subject my people to the whims of an entity who throws a planetary fit when it pleases him."

Stinson relaxed. He'd had his say. Sybtl trembled beside him. A small mammal, round, furry, hopped by, sniffing inquisitively.

Sybtl said, "Is the Sand God happy?" She shook her head. "No, he is not happy. He is old, old, old. I can feel it, My people say that when one gets too old it is well to die. But Gods never die, do they? I would not like to be a God."

"Stinson," the Sand God said. "You said I was adolescent. You are correct. Do you remember I told you how my people, the entire race, left their bodies at the same time? Do you imagine all of us were adults?"

"I suppose not. Sounds reasonable. How old were you?"

"Chronologically, by our standards, I was nine years old."

"But you continued to develop after . . ."

"No."

STINSON tried to imagine it. At first there must have been a single voice crying into a monstrous emptiness, "Mother, where are you? *MOTHER!* Where is

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everyone?" A frenzied searching of the planet, the solar system, the galaxy. Then a returning to the planet. Empty . . . Change. Buildings, roads, bridges weathering slowly. Such a race would have built of durable metal. Durable? Centuries, eons passed. Buildings crumbled to dust, dust blew away. Bridges eroded, fell, decomposed into basic elements. The shape of constellations changed. All trace of civilization passed except in the cavern of the heated pool. Constellations disappeared, new patterns formed in the night sky. The unutterably total void of time— FIVE HUNDRED THOUSAND YEARS!

And a nine-year-old child brooding over an empty world.

"I don't understand why your development stopped," Stinson said.

"Nor do I. But perhaps . . . well, I sense that I would continue, if you brought your people here. You have already taught me the value of life. There is a oneness, a bond that ties each living thing to every other living thing. It is a lesson my people never knew. Select any portion of this planet that suits you. Take the webfooted woman for your wife. Have children. I promise never to harm you in any way."

"The webfoots?"

"You and they shall share the planet."

The Sand God disappeared. Sybtl said, "Is the Sand God angry again?"

"No, he is not angry."

"I'm glad. You will leave now?"

"No. This is my home."

She laughed softly. "You are a strange God."

"Listen," he said, "I am not a God. Get that through your head."

She drew him into the cave. Her lips were cool and sweet. The cave was pleasantly warm.

— **BILL DOEDE**

Have you read if ?

The July issue is packed with headliners:

A TASTE OF TENURE
by GORDON R. DICKSON

THE PLANET WITH NO NIGHTMARES
by JIM HARMON

DOORMAT WORLD
by J. T. McINTOSH

— and many more! July issue still on sale — don't miss it!

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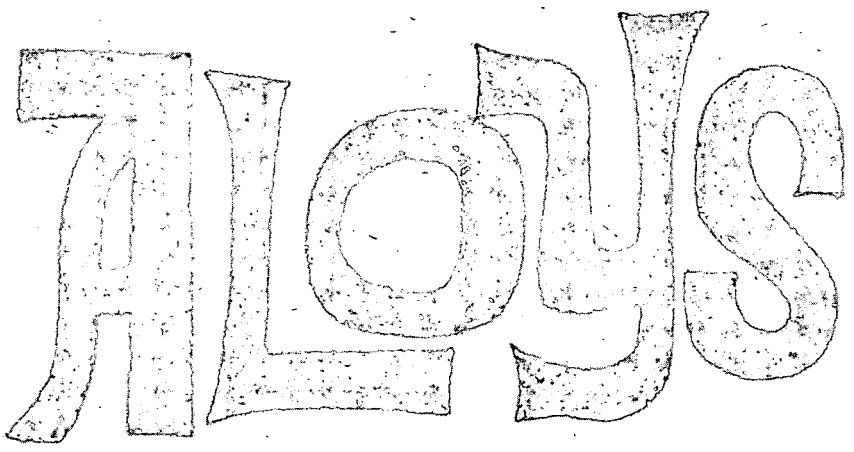
HE HAD flared up more brightly than anyone in memory. And then he was gone. Yet there was ironic laughter where he had been; and his ghost still walked. That was the oddest thing: to encounter his ghost.

It was like coming suddenly on Haley's Comet drinking beer at the Plugged Nickel Bar, and having it deny that it was a celestial phenomenon at all, that it had ever been beyond the sun. For he could have been the man of the century, and now it was not even known if he was alive. And if he were alive, it would be very odd if he would be hanging around places like the Plugged Nickel Bar.

This all begins with the award. But before that it begins with the man.

Professor Aloys Foulcault-Oeg was acutely embarrassed and in a state of dread.

"These I have to speak to, all



BY R. A. LAFFERTY Illustrated by WALKER

He appeared in glory and sank without a trace. Why? How? For the first time anywhere, here is the startling inside story.

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these great men. Is even glory worth the price when it must be paid in such coin?"

Aloys did not have the amenities, the polish, the tact. A child of penury, he had all his life eaten bread that was part sawdust, and worn shoes that were part cardboard. He had an overcoat that had been his father's, and before that his grandfather's.

This coat was no longer handsome, its holes being stuffed and quilted with ancient rags. It was long past its years of greatness, and even when Aloys had inherited it as a young man it was in the afternoon of its life. And yet it was worth more than anything else he owned in the world.

Professor Aloys had become great in spite of — or because of? — his poverty. He had worked out his finest theory, a series of nineteen interlocked equations of cosmic shapeliness and simplicity. He had worked it out on a great piece of butchers' paper soaked with lamb's blood, and had so given it to the world.

And once it was given, it was almost as though nothing else could be added on any subject whatsoever. Any further detailing would be only footnotes to it and all the sciences no more than commentaries.

Naturally this made him famous. But the beauty of it was that it made him famous, not to the commonalty of mankind (this would have been a burden to his sensitively tuned soul), but to a small and scattered class of extremely erudite men (about a score of them in the world). Their recognition brought him almost, if not quite, complete satisfaction.

But he was not famous in his own street or his own quarter of town. And it was in this stark conglomerate of dark-souled alleys and roofs that Professor Aloys had lived all his life till just thirty-seven days ago.

When he received the announcement, award, and invitation, he quickly calculated the time. It was not very long to allow travel halfway around the world. Being locked out of his rooms, as he often was, he was unencumbered by baggage or furniture, and he left for the ceremony at once.

With the announcement, award, and invitation, there had also been a check; but as he was not overly familiar with the world of finance or with the English language in which it was written, he did not recognize it for what it was. Having used the back of it to write down a formula that had crept into his mind, he shoved the check, forgotten, into one of the pockets of his greatcoat.

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FOR THREE days he rode a river boat to the port city, hidden and hungry. There he concealed himself on an ocean tramp. That he did not starve on this was due to the caprice of the low-lifers who discovered him, for they made him stay hidden in a terrible bunker and every day or two they passed in a bucket to him.

Then, several ports and many days later, he left the ship like a crippled, dirty animal. And it was in That City and on That Day. For the award was to be that evening.

"These I have to speak to, all these wonderful men who are higher than the grocers, higher than the butchers even. These men get more respect than a policeman, than a canal boat captain. They are wiser than a mayor and more honored than a merchant. They know arts more intricate than a clockmaker's and are virtuous beyond the politicians. More perspicacious than editors, more talented than actors, these are the great men of the world. And I am only Aloys, and now I am too ragged and dirty even to be Aloys any more. I no longer am a man with a name."

For he was very humble as he walked the great town where even the shop girls were dressed like princesses, and all the restaurants were so fine that only the rich people would have dared to go in them at all. Had there been poor people (and there were none) there would have been no place for them to eat.

"But it is to me they have given the prize. Not to Schellendore and not to Ottlebaum, not to Francks nor Timiryaseff, not even to Pitirim-Koss, the latchet of whose shoe I am not — but why do I say that? — he was not, after all, very bright — all of them are inadequate in some way — the only one who was ever able to get to the heart of these great things was Aloys Foulcault-Oeg, who happens to be myself. It is a strange thing that they should honor me, and yet I believe they could not have made a better choice."

So pride and fear warred in him, but it was always the pride that lost. For he had only a little bit of pride, undernourished and on quaking ground, and against it was a whole legion of fears, apprehensions, shames, dreads, embarrassments, and nightmarish bashfulnesses.

He begged a little bit when he had found a poor part of town. But even here the people were of the rich poor, not the poor as he had known them.

When he had money in his pocket, he had a meal. Then he went to Jiffy Quick While You

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Wait Cleaners Open Day and Night to have his clothes cleaned. He wrapped himself in dignity and a blanket while he waited. And as the daylight was coming to an end, they brought his clothes back to him.

"We have done all we could do. If we had a week or a month, we might do a little more, but not much."

THEN HE went out into the town, cleaner than he had been in many years, and he walked to the hall of the Commendation and Award. Here he watched all the great men arrive in private cars and taxis: Ergodic Eimer, August Angstrom, Vladimir Vor. He watched them and thought of what he would say to them, and then he realized that he had forgotten his English.

"I remember dog, that is the first word I ever learned, but what will I say to them about a dog? I remember house and horse and apple and fish. Oh, now I remember the entire language. But what if I forget it again? Would it not be an odd speech if I could only say apple and fish and house and dog? I would be shamed."

He wished he were rich and could dress in white like the street sweepers, or in black leather like the newsboy on the corner. He saw Edward Edelstein

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and Christopher Cronin enter and he cowered on the street and knew that he would never be able to talk to those great men.

A fine gentleman came out and walked directly to him.

"You are the great Professor Foulcault-Oeg? I would have known you anywhere. True greatness shines from you. Our city is honored tonight. Come inside and we will go to a little room apart, for I see that you will have to compose yourself first. I am Graf-Doktor Hercule Bienville-Stravroguine."

Whyever he said he was the Graf-Doktor is a mystery, because he was Willy McGilly and the other was just a name that he made up that minute.

Within, they went to a small room behind the cloak room. But here, in spite of the smooth kindness of the gracious gentleman, Aloys knew that he would never be able to compose himself. He was an epouvantail, a pugalo, a clown, a ragamuffin. He looked at the nineteen-point outline of the address he was to give. He shuddered and he gobbled like a turkey. He sniffled and he wiped his nose on his sleeve. He was terrified that the climax of his life's work should find him too craven to accept it. And he discovered that he had forgotten his English again.

"I remember bread and butter, but I don't know which one goes on top. I know pencil and penknife and bed, but I have entirely forgotten the word for maternal uncle. I remember plow, but what in the world will I say to all these great men about a plow? I pray that this cup may pass from me."

Then he disintegrated in one abject mass of terror. Several minutes went by.

BUT WHEN he emerged from the room he was a different man entirely. Erect, alive, intense, queerly handsome, and now in formal attire, he mounted with the sure grace of a panther to the speaker's platform. Once only he glanced at the nineteen-point outline of his address. As there is no point in keeping it a secret, it was as follows: 1. Cepheid and Cerium — How Long Is a Yardstick? 2. Double Trouble—Is Ours a Binary Universe? 3. Cerebrum and Cortex — the Mathematics of Melancholia. 4. Microphysics and Megacyclic Polyneums. 5. *Ego, No, Hemeis* — the Personality of the Subconscious. 6. Linear Convexity and Lateral Intransigence. 7. Betelgeuse Betrayed — the Myth of Magnitude. 8. Mu-Meson, the Secret of Metamorphosis. 9. Theogony and Tremor — the Mathematics of Seismol-

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ogy. 10. Planck's Constant and Agnesi's Variable. 11. Diencephalon and Di-Gamma — Unconscionable Thoughts about Consciousness. 12. Inverse Squares and the Quintesimal Radicals. 13. The Chain of Error in the Lineal B Translation. 14. Skepticism — the Humor of the Humorless. 15. Ogive and Volute — Thoughts on Celestial Curviture. 16. Conic Sections — Small Pieces of Infinity. 17. Eschatology — Medium Thoughts about the End. 18. Hypo-polarity and Cosmic Hysteresis. 19. The Invisible Quadratic, or This is All Simpler than You Think.

You will immediately see the beauty of this skeleton, and yet to flesh it would not be the work of an ordinary man.

He glanced over it with the sure smile of complete confidence. Then he spoke softly to the master of ceremonies in a whisper with a rumble that could be heard throughout the hall.

"I am here. I will begin. There is no need for any further introduction."

For the next three and a half hours he held that intelligent audience completely spellbound, enchanted. They followed, or seemed to follow, his lightning flashes of metaphor illumining the craggy chasms of his vasty subjects.

They thrilled to the magnetic power of his voice, urbane yet untamed, with its polyglot phrasing and its bare touch of accent so strange as to be baffling; ancient, surely, and yet, from a land beyond the Pale. And they quivered with interior pleasure at the glorious unfolding in climax after climax of these before only half-glimpsed vistas.

Here was a world of mystery revealed in all its wildness, and it obeyed and stood still, and he named its name. The nebula and the conch lay down together, and the ultra-galaxies equated themselves with the zeta mesons. Like a rich householder, he brought from his store treasures old and new, and nothing like them had ever been seen or heard before.

AT ONE POINT Professor Timiryaseff cried out in bafflement and incomprehension, and Doctor Ergodic Eimer buried his face in his hands, for even these most erudite men could not glimpse all the shattering profundity revealed by the fantastic speaker.

And when it was over they were limp and delighted that so much had been made known to them. They had the crown without the cross, and the odd little genius had filled them with a rich glow.

The rest was perfunctory,

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commendations and testimonials from all the great men. The trophy, heavy and rich but not flashy, worth the lifetime salary of a professor of mathematics, was accepted almost carelessly. And then the cup was passed quietly, which is to say the tall cool glasses went around as the men still lingered and talked with hushed pleasure.

"Gin," said the astonishing orator. "It is the drink of bums and impoverished scholars, and I am both. Yes, anything at all with it."

Then he spoke to Maecenas, who was at his side, the patron who was footing the bill for all this gracious extravagance.

"The check I have never cashed, having been much in movement since I have received it. And as to me it is a large amount, though perhaps not to others, and as you yourself have signed it, I wonder if you could cash it for me now."

"At once," said Maecenas, "at once. Ten minutes and we shall have the sum here. Ah, you have endorsed it with a formula! Who but Professor Aloys Foulcault-Oeg could be so droll? Look, he has endorsed it with a formula!"

"Look, look! Let us copy! Why, this is marvelous! It takes us even beyond his great speech of tonight. The implications of it!"

"Oh, the implications!" they

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said as they copied it off, and the implications rang in their heads like bells of the future.

Now it had suddenly become very late, and the elated little man with the gold and gemmed trophy under one arm and the packet of bank notes in his pocket disappeared as by magic.

PROFESSOR Aloys Foulcault-Oeg was not seen again; or, if seen, he was not known, for hardly anyone would have known his face. In fact, when he had painfully released the bonds by which he had been tied in the little room behind the cloak room, and removed the shackles from his ankles, he did not pause at all, but slipped into his great-coat and ran out into the night. Not for many blocks did he even remove the gag from his mouth, not realizing in his confusion what it was that obstructed his speech and breathing. But when he got it out, it was a pleasant relief.

A kind gentleman took him in hand, the second to do so that night. He was bundled into a kind of taxi and driven to a mysterious quarter called Wreckville. And deep inside a secret building he was given a bath and a bowl of hot soup. And later he gathered with others at a festive board.

Here Willy McGilly was king. As he worked his way into his cups with the gold trophy in front of him, he expounded and elucidated.

"I was wonderful. I held them in the palm of my hand. Was I not wonderful, Oeg?"

"I could not hear all, for I was on the floor of the little room. But from what I could hear, yes, you were wonderful."

"Only once in my life did I give a better speech. It was the same speech, but it was newer then. This was in Little Dogie, New Mexico, and I was selling a snake-oil derivative whose secret I still cannot reveal. But I was good tonight and some of them cried. And now what will you do, Oeg? Do you know what we are?"

"*Moshennekov.*"

"Why, so we are."

"*Schwindlern.*"

"The very word."

"Low-life con men. And the world you live on is not the one you were born on. I will join you if I may."

"Oeg, you have a talent for going to the core of the apple."

For when a man (however unlikely a man) shows real talent, then the Wreckville bunch has to recruit him. They cannot have uncontrolled talent running loose in the commonalty of mankind.

— R. A. LAFFERTY

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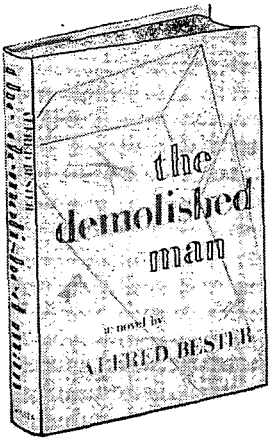

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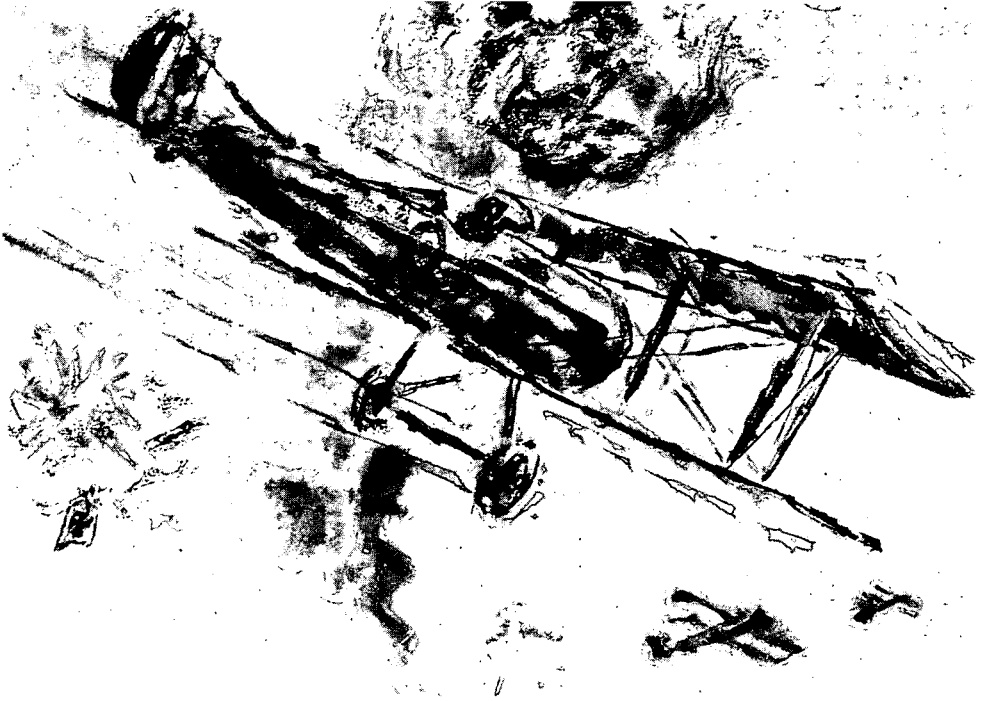

THE AIR OF CASTOR OIL

IT surely was all right for me to let myself do it now. I couldn't have been more safe. In the window of the radio store a color television set was enjoying a quiz by itself and creased in my pocket was the newspaper account of the failure of a monumental human adventure in the blooming extinction of a huge rocket. The boys on the corner seemed hardly human, scowling anthropoids in walrus-skin coats. It was my own time. Anybody could see I was safe, and I could risk doing what I ached to do.

I turned the corner.

The breaks were against me from the start. It didn't come as any surprise. I could never get away with it. I knew that all along.

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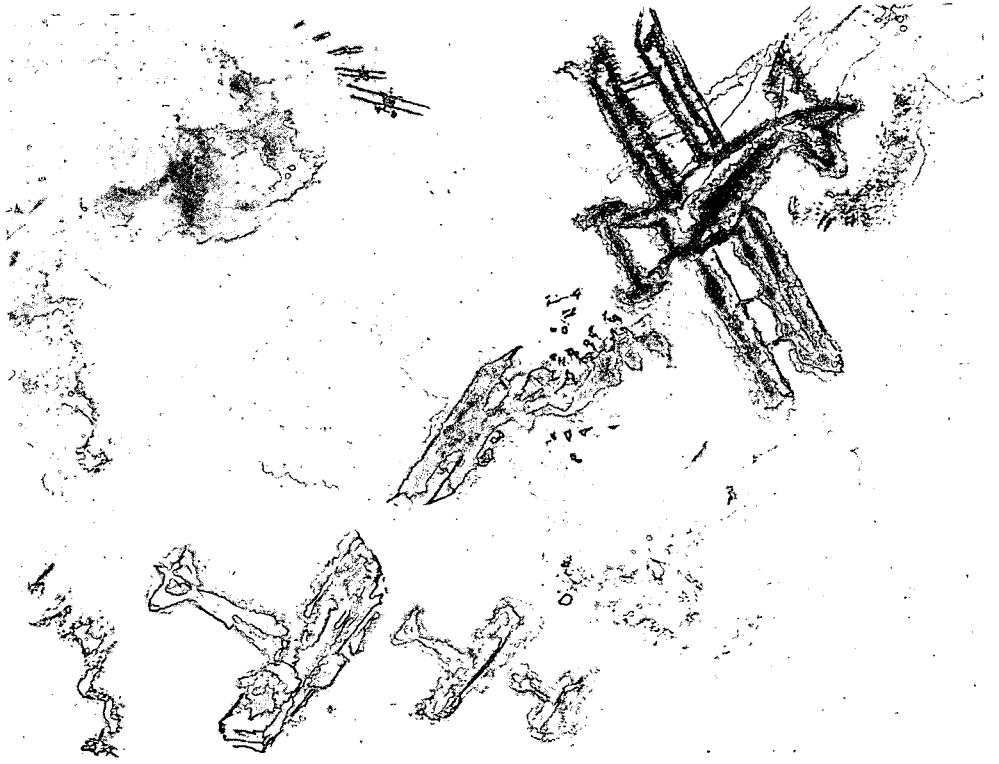

Let the dead past bury its dead? Not while I am alive, it won't! BY JIM HARMON Illustrated by WALKER

There was a Packard parked just beyond the fire plug.

The metal and glass fronts of the buildings didn't show back here, only seasoned brick glued with powdering chalk. The line of the block seemed to stretch back, ever further away from the glossy fronts into the crumbling stone.

A man brushed past me, wearing an Ivy League suit and snap-brim hat, carrying a briefcase. And, reassuringly, he was in a hurry.

I decided to chance it. I certainly wanted to do it in the worst way.

My footsteps carried me on down the block.

A little car spurted on past me. One of those foreign jobs, I

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decided. Only it wasn't. I fixed the silhouette in my mind's eye and identified it: A Henry J.

Still, I wasn't worried. It was actually too early in the day. It wasn't as if it were evening or anything like that.

The little store was right where I left it, rotting quietly to itself. The Back Number Store, the faded circus poster proclaimed in red and gold, or now, pink and lemon. In the window, in cellophane envelopes, were the first issue of *Life*, a recent issue of *Modern Man* with a modern woman fronting it, a Big Big Book of *Buck Rogers and the Silver Cities of Venus*, and a brand-new, sun-bleached copy of *Doctor Zhivago*.

There was a little car at the curb. This time I recognized that it wasn't an import, just a Crosley.

I went in, the brass handle making me conscious of the sweat on my palm.

THE old man sat behind a fortress of magazines and books, treacherously reading the funnies in a newspaper. His bald head swiveled on the hunched shoulders of his sweater which was azuring toward white. He grinned, toothless.

"Came back for more of the stuff, did you?"

He laid down the newspaper. (That subheadline couldn't really be making so nasty a suggestion to a noted general, could it?)

"Yes," I laughed, not very true.

"I know what a craving can be. I shouldn't smoke, but I do. I've tried to stop but I lie there thinking about cigarettes half the night. Long ones, short ones, smoked ones, ones unlit. I feel like I could smoke one in each hand. It like that with you?"

"Not that bad. To me it's just —"

"Don't tell me reading isn't a craving with some of you fellows. I've seen guys come in here, hardly two threads stuck together on them, and grab up them horror magazines and read and read, until sweat starts rolling off the end of their nose. I've hardly got the heart to throw 'em out."

Horror magazines. Ones with lovely girls about to have their flesh shredded by toothy vampires. Yes, they were a part of it. Not a big part, but a part.

"That's not what I want to see. I want—"

The old man snickered. "I know what you want. Indeed I do. This way."

I followed his spidering hand and sure enough, there they were. Stacks upon stacks of air-war pulp magazines.

"Fifteen cents for ones in good condition," the old man pronounced the ritual, "a dime for ones with incomplete covers,

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three for a quarter, check 'em at the desk when you go."

I ran my hand down a stack. *Wings, Daredevil Aces, G-8 and his Battle Aces, The Lone Eagle,* all of them.

The old man was watching me. He skittered back across the floor and snatched up a magazine. It was a copy of *Sky Fighters* with a girl in a painted-on flying suit hanging from the struts of a Tiger Moth.

"This one, this one," he said. "This must be a good one. I bet she gets shoved right into that propeller there. I bet she gets chopped to pieces. Pieces."

"I'll take it."

Reluctantly he handed over the magazine, waited a moment, then left me.

I stared at the stacks of flying story magazines and I felt the slow run of the drop of sweat down my nose.

My sickness was terrible. It is as bad to be nostalgic for things you have never known as for an orphan who has never had a home to be homesick.

LIVING in the past, that was always me. I never watched anything on TV made later than 1935. I was in love with Garbo, Ginger Rogers, Dolores del Rio. My favorite stars were Richard Dix, Chester Morris and Richard Arlen.

The music I listened to was Gershwin and Arlen and Chicago jazz.

And my reading was the pulp literature harking back to the First World War. This was the biggest part of it all, I think.

You identify with the hero of any story if it's well enough written. But the identification I felt with the pilots in air-war stories was plainly ridiculous.

I was there.

I was in the saddle of the cockpit, feeling on my face the bite of the slipstream — no, that was a later term — the prop-wash? — no, that was still later — the backlash from the screw, that was it. I was lifting to meet the Fokker triplanes in the dawn sky. Then in a moment my Vickers was chattering in answer to Spandaus, firing through the screw outfitted with iron edges to deflect bullets that did not pass to the left and right. And back through the aerial maps in the cockpit pocket at my knee.

Here he comes, the Spandaus firing right through the screw in perfect synchronization. Look at that chivalrous wave. You can almost see the dueling scar on his check from old Krautenberg. He can afford to be chivalrous in that Fokker. I'd like to trade this skiddoo for it. That may be just what I do too if I don't watch it.

You ain't any Boelcke, mister,

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but this is from the Fifth for Squadron 70.

Missed!

Hard on that rudder! God, look at the snake in that fabric. At least it was a lie about them using incendiaries.

One of your own tricks for you, Heinie. Up on the stick, up under your tail, into the blind spot. Where am I? Where am I? *Right here.*

Look at that tail go. Tony can't be giving you as good stuff as he claims.

So long. I'm waving, see.

He's pulling her up. No tail and he's pulling her up. He's a good man. Come on. A little more. A little more and you can deadstick her. Come on, buddy. You're doing it. You're pulling her up —

But not enough.

God, what a mess.

I'm sick.

That damned castor oil in the carburetor. I'll be in the W. C. until oh-six-hundred . . .

NO, the air wasn't one of castor oil but the pleasant smell of aged paper and printer's ink.

I'd been daydreaming again. I shouldn't forget things were getting different lately. It was becoming dangerous.

I gathered up an armload of air-war magazines at random.

Leaning across the table, I noticed the curtain in back for the first time. It was a beaded curtain of many different colors. Theda Bara might have worn it for a skirt. Behind the curtain was a television set. It was a comforting anti-anachronism here.

The six- or eight-inch picture was on a very flat tube, a more pronounced Predicta. The size and the flatness didn't seem to go together. Then I saw that the top part of the set was a mirror reflecting an image from the roof of the cabinet where the actual picture tube lay flat.

There was an old movie on the channel. An old, old movie. Lon Chaney, Sr., in a western as a badman. He was protecting a doll-faced blonde from the rest of the gang, standing them off from a grove of rocks. The flickering action caught my unblinking eyes.

Tom Santschi is sneaking across the top of the rocks, a knife in his dirty half-breed hand. Raymond Hatton makes a try for his old boss, but Chaney stops his clock for him. Now William Farnum is riding up with the posse. Tom makes a try with the knife, the girl screams, and Chaney turns the blade back on him. It goes through his neck, all the way through.

The blonde is running toward Farnum as he polishes off the rest of the gang and dismounts, her blouse shredded, revealing

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one breast — is that the dawn of Bessie Love? Chaney stands up in the rocks. Farnum aims his six-shooter. No, no, say the girl's lips. "No!" "No!" says the subtitle. Farnum fires. Swimming in blood, Chaney smiles sadly and falls.

I had seen movies like that before.

When I was a kid, I had seen *Flicker Flashbacks* between chapters of Flash Gordon and Johnny Mack Brown westerns. I looked at old movies and heard the oily voice making fun of them. But hadn't I also seen these pictures with the sound of piano playing and low conversation?

I had seen these pictures before the war.

The war had made a lot of difference in my life.

Comic books were cut down to half their size, from 64 to 32 pages, and prices had gone up to where you had to pay $17 for a pair of shoes, so high that people said Wilson should do something about it.

Tom Mix had gone off the air and he and his Cowboy Commandos beat the Japs in comic books. Only, hadn't he sold Liberty Bonds with Helen Morgan?

And at school I had bought Defense — War — Savings — Security — Liberty — Freedom — I had bought stamps at school. I never did get enough to trade in for a bond, but Mama had taken my book and traded parts of it in for coffee. She could never get enough coffee . . .

"Nobody would look at my magazines," the old man chuckled, "if I put it out front. My boy got me that. He runs a radio and Victrola store. A good boy. His name's in the fishbowl."

I pressed some money on him and walked myself out of the store. Shutting the door, I saw that the copy of *Doctor Zhivago* had been replaced by *Gone With the Wind*.

THE street was full of wooden-paneled station wagons, blunt little roadsters with canvas tops, swept-back, tailless sedans. Only one dark, tailed, over-thyroided car moved through the traffic. It had a light on the roof.

I dodged in front of a horse-drawn garbage wagon and behind an electric postal truck and ran for that light, leaving a trail of gaudy air battles checkering the street behind me.

I grabbed the handle on the door, opened it and threw myself into the back seat.

"Madison Avenue," I said from my diaphragm, without any breath behind it.

Something was wrong. Two men were in the front seat. The driver showed me his hard, ex-

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pressionless face. "What do you think you are doing?"

"This isn't a taxicab?" I asked blankly.

"Park Police."

I sat there while we drove on for a few minutes.

"D. & D.," the second man said to the driver.

"Right into our laps."

The second officer leaned forward and clicked something. "I'll get the City boys."

"No, kill it, Carl. Think of all that damned paper work."

Carl shrugged. "What will we do with him?"

I was beginning to attach myself to my surroundings. The street was full of traffic. My kind of traffic. Cars that were too big or too small.

"Look, officers, I'm not drunk or disorderly. I thought this was a cab. I just wanted to get away from back then — I mean back *there*."

The two policemen exchanged glances.

"What were you running from?" the driver asked.

How could I tell him that?

Before I even got a chance to try, he said: "What did you do?"

"I didn't *do* anything!"

The car was turning, turning into shadows, stopping. We were in an alley. Soggy newspapers, dead fish, prowling cats, a broken die, half a dice, looking big in the frame of my thick, probably bullet-proof window.

The men opened their doors and then mine.

"Out."

I climbed out and stood by the car, blinking.

"You were causing some kind of trouble in that neighborhood back there," the driver announced.

"Really, officers—"

"What's your name?"

"Hilliard Turner. There—"

"We don't want you going back there again, Turner, causing trouble. Understand?"

"Officer, I only bought some books — I mean magazines."

"These?" the second man, Carl, asked. He had retrieved them from the back seat. "Look here, Sarge. They look pretty dirty."

Sarge took up the *Sky Fighters* with the girl in the elastic flying suit. "Filth," he said.

"You know about the laws governing pornography, Turner."

"Those aren't pornography and they are my property!"

I reached for them and Carl pulled them back, grinning. "You don't want to read these. They aren't good for you. We're confiscating them."

"Look here, I'm a citizen! You can't—"

Carl shoved me back a little. "Can't we?"

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Sarge stepped in front of me, his face in deadly earnest. "How about it, Turner? You a narcotics user?"

He grabbed my wrist and started rolling up my sleeve to look for needle marks. I twisted away from him.

"Resisting an officer," Sarge said almostly sadly.

At that, Carl loped up beside him.

The two of them started to beat me.

They hit clean, in the belly and guts, but not in the groin. They gave me clean white flashes of pain, instead of angry, red-streaked ones. I didn't fight back, not against the two of them. I knew that much. I didn't even try to block their blows. I stood with my arms at my sides, leaning back against the car, and hearing myself grunt at each blow.

They stood away from me and let me fold helplessly to the greasy brick.

"Stay away from that neighborhood and stay out of trouble," Sarge's voice said above me.

I looked up a little bit and saw an ugly, battered hand thumbing across a stack of half a dozen magazines like a giant deck of cards.

"Why don't you take up detective stories?" he asked me.

I never heard the squad car drive away.

HOME. I lighted the living room from the door, looked around for intruders for the first time I could remember, and went inside.

I threw myself on the couch and rubbed my stomach. I wasn't hurt badly. My middle was going to be sorer in the morning than it was now.

Lighting up a cigarette, I watched the shapes of smoke and tried to think.

I looked at it objectively, forward and back.

The solution was obvious.

First of all, I positively could *not* have been an aviator in World War One. I was in my mid-twenties; anybody could tell that by looking at me. The time was the late 'Fifties; anybody could tell that from the blank-faced Motorola in the corner, the new Edsels on the street. Memories of air combat in Spads and Nieuports stirred in me by old magazines, Quentin Reynolds, and re-runs of *Dawn Patrol* on television were mere hallucinations.

Neither could I remember drinking bootleg hooch in speakeasies, hearing Floyd Gibbons announce the Dempsey-Tunney fight, or paying $3.80 to get into the first run of *Gone with the Wind*.

Only . . . I probably had seen GWTW. Hadn't I gone with my

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mother to a matinee? Didn't she pay 90¢ for me? So how could I remember taking a girl, brunette, red sweater, Cathy, and paying $3.80 each? I couldn't. Different runs. That was it. The thing had been around half a dozen times. But would it have been $3.80 no more than ten years ago?

I struck up a new cigarette.

The thing I must remember, I told myself, was that my recollections were false and unreliable. It would do me no good to keep following these false memories in a closed curve.

I touched my navel area and flinched. The beating, I was confident, had been real. But it had been a nightmare. Those cops couldn't have been true. They were a small boy's bad dream about symbolized authority. They were keeping me from re-entering the past where I belonged, punishing me to make me stay in my trap of the present.

Oh, God.

I rolled over on my face and pushed it into the upholstery.

That was the worst part of it. False memories, feelings of persecution, that was one thing. Believing that you are actively caught up in a mixture of the past with the present, a Daliesque viscosity of reality, was something else.

I needed help.

Or if there was no help for me, it was my duty to have myself placed where I couldn't harm other consumers.

If there was one thing that working for an advertising agency had taught me, it was social responsibility.

I took up the phone book and located several psychiatrists. I selected one at random, for no particular reason.

Dr. Ernest G. Rickenbacker.

I memorized the address and heaved myself to my feet.

THE doctor's office was as green as the inside of a mentholated cigarette commercial.

The cool, lovely receptionist told me to wait and I did, tasting mint inside my mouth.

After several long, peaceful minutes the inner door opened.

"Mr. Turner, I can't seem to find any record of an appointment for you in Dr. Rickenbacker's files," the man said.

I got to my feet. "Then I'll come back."

He took my arm. "No, no, I can fit you in."

"I didn't have an appointment. I just came."

"I understand."

"Maybe I had better go."

"I won't hear of it."

I could have pulled loose from him, but somehow I felt that if I did try to pull away, the grip

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would tighten and I would never get away.

I looked up into that long, hard, blank face that seemed so recently familiar.

"I'm Dr. Sergeant," he said. "I'm taking care of Dr. Rickenbacker's practice for him while he is on vacation."

I nodded. What I was thinking could only be another symptom of my illness.

He led me inside and closed the door.

The door made a strange sound in closing. It didn't go *snick-bonk;* it made a noise like *click-clack-clunk.*

"Now," he said, "would you like to lie down on the couch and tell me about it? Some people have preconceived ideas that I don't want to fight with at the beginning. Or, if you prefer, you can sit there in front of my desk and tell me all about it. Remember, I'm a psychiatrist, a doctor, not just a psychoanalyst."

I took possession of the chair and Sergeant faced me across his desk.

"I feel," I said, "that I am caught up in some kind of time travel."

"I see. Have you read much science fiction, Mr. Turner?"

"Some. I read a lot. All kinds of books. Tolstoi, Twain, Hemingway, Luke Short, John D. MacDonald, Huxley."

"You should *read* them instead of live them. Catharsis. Sublimate, Mr. Turner. For instance, to a certain type of person, I often recommend the mysteries of Mickey Spillane."

I seemed to be losing control of the conversation. "But this time travel . . . "

"Mr. Turner, do you really believe in 'time travel'?"

"No."

"Then how can there be any such thing? It can't be real."

"I know that! I want to be cured of imagining it."

"The first step is to utterly renounce the idea. Stop thinking about the past. Think of the future."

"How did you know I keep slipping back into the past?" I asked.

SERGEANT'S hands were more expressive than his face. "You mentioned time travel . . ."

"But not to the past or to the future," I said.

"But you did, Mr. Turner. You told me all about thinking you could go into the past by visiting a book store where they sold old magazines. You told me how the intrusion of the past got worse with every visit."

I blinked. "I did? I did?"

"Of course."

I stood up. "I did not!"

"Please try to keep from get-

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ting violent, Mr. Turner. People like you actually have more control over themselves than you realize. If you *will* yourself to be calm . . ."

"I *know* I didn't tell you a thing about the Back Number Store. I'm starting to think I'm not crazy at all. You—you're trying to do something to me. You're all in it together."

Sergeant shook his head sadly.

I realized how it all sounded.

"Good — GOD!" I moaned.

I put my hands to my face and I felt the vein over my left eye swelling, pulsing.

Through the bars of my fingers I saw Sergeant motion me down with one eloquent hand. I took my hands away — I didn't like looking through bars — and sat down.

"Now," Sergeant said, steepling his fingers, "I know of a completely nice place in the country. Of course, if you respond properly . . ."

Those hands of his.

There was something about them that wasn't so. They might have been the hands of a corpse, or a doll . . .

I lurched across the desk and grabbed his wrist.

"*Please,* Mr. Turner! violence will—"

My fingers clawed at the backs of his hands and my nails dragged off ugly strips of some theatrical stuff—collodion, I think — that had covered the scrapes and bruises he had taken hammering away at me and my belt buckle.

Sergeant.

Sarge.

I let go of him and stood away.

For the first time, Sergeant smiled.

I backed to the door and turned the knob behind my back. It wouldn't open.

I turned around and rattled it, pulled on it, braced my foot against the wall and tugged.

"Locked," Sergeant supplied.

He was coming toward me, I could tell. I wheeled and faced him. He had a hypodermic needle. It was the smallest one I had ever seen and it had an iridescence or luminosity about it, a gleaming silver dart.

I closed with him.

BY THE way he moved, I knew he was used to physical combat, but you can't win them all, and I had been in a lot of scraps when I had been younger. (Hadn't I?)

I stepped in while he was trying to decide whether to use the hypo on me or drop it to have his hands free. I stiff-handed him in the solar plexus and crossed my fist into the hollow of the apex arch of his jawbone. He dropped.

I gave him a kick at the base

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of his spine. He grunted and lay still.

There was a rapping on the door. "Doctor? Doctor?"

I searched through his pockets. He didn't have any keys. He didn't have any money or identification or a gun. He had a handkerchief and a ballpoint pen.

The receptionist had moved away from the door and was talking to somebody, in person or on the phone or intercom.

There wasn't any back door.

I went to the window. The city stretched out in an impressive panorama. On the street below, traffic crawled. There was a ledge. Quite a wide, old-fashioned ornamental ledge.

The ledge ran beneath the windows of all the offices on this floor. The fourteenth, I remembered.

I had seen it done in movies all my life. Harold Lloyd, Douglas Fairbanks, Buster Keaton were always doing it for some reason or other. I had a good reason.

I unlatched the window and climbed out into the dry, crisp breeze.

The movies didn't know much about convection. The updraft nearly lifted me off the ledge, but the cornice was so wide I could keep out of the wind if I kept myself flat against the side of the building.

The next window was about twenty feet away. I had covered half that distance, moving my feet with a sideways crab motion, when Carl, indisputably the second policeman, put his head out of the window where I was heading and pointed a .38 revolver at me, saying in a let's-have-no-foolishness tone: "Get in here."

I went the other way.

The cool, lovely receptionist was in Sergeant's window with the tiny silver needle in readiness.

I kept shuffling toward the girl. I had decided I would rather wrestle with her over the needle than fight Carl over the rod. Idiotically, I smiled at that idea.

I slipped.

I was falling down the fourteen stories without even a moment of windmilling for balance. I was just gone.

Lines were converging, and I was converging on the lines.

You aren't going to be able to Immelmann out of this dive, Turner. Good-by, Turner.

Death.

A sleep, a reawakening, a lie. It's nothing like that. It's nothing.

The end of everything you ever were or ever could be.

I hit.

My kneecap hurt like hell. I had scraped it badly.

Reality was all over me in patches. I showed through as a

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line drawing, crudely done, a cartoon.

Some kind of projection. Hightest Cinerama, that was all reality meant.

I was kneeling on a hard surface no more than six feet from the window from which I had fallen. It was still fourteen flights up, more or less, but *Down* was broken and splattered over me.

I stood up, moving forward a step.

It brought me halfway through the screen, halfway through the wall at the base of the building. The other side of the screen. The solid side, I found, stepping through, bracing a hand on the image.

Looking up fourteen floors, I saw an unbroken line of peacefully closed panes.

I REMEMBERED riding up in the elevator, the moments inside, the faint feeling of vertigo. Of course, who was to say the elevator really moved? Maybe they had only switched scenery on me while I was caught inside, listening to the phony hum, seeing the flashing lights. Either cut down or increase the oxygen supply inside the cubicle suddenly and that would contribute a sensation of change, of movement. They had it all worked out.

My fingers rubbed my head briskly, both hands working, trying to get some circulation in my brain.

I guessed I had to run. There didn't seem much else to do.

I ran.

Get help?

Not this old lady and her daughter. Not this Neanderthal sailor on his way to a bar and a blonde. Not the bookkeeper. Maybe the car salesman, ex-Army, Lions Club member, beefy, respectable, well-intentioned, not a complete fool. The guy on the corner reading a newspaper by the bus stop.

"I need help," I panted to him. "Somebody's trying to kidnap me."

"Really makes you sick to hear about something like that, doesn't it?" he said. "I'm in favor of the Lindbergh Law myself."

"I'm not sure whether—"

"This heat is murder, isn't it? Especially here in these concrete canyons. Sometimes I wish I was back in Springfield. Cool, shaded streets . . ."

"Listen to me! These people, they're conspiring against me, trying to drive me insane! Two men, a girl—"

"For my money, Marilyn Monroe is *the* doll of the world. I just don't understand these guys who say she hasn't got class. She gets class by satirizing girls without any . . ."

He was like anybody you

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might talk to on the street. I knew what he would say if I cued him with "baseball" or "Russia" instead of the key words I had used.

I should have known better, but I wanted to touch him in some way, make him know I was alive. I grabbed him and shook him by the shoulders, and there was a whoosh and as I might have expected he collapsed like the insubstantiality he was.

There was a stick figure of a man left before me, an economical skeleton supporting the shell of a human being and two-thirds of a two-trouser suit.

Hide.

I went into the first shop I came to — Milady's Personals.

Appropriately, it was a false front.

A neutral-colored gray surface, too smooth for concrete, stretched away into some shadows. The area was littered with trash.

Cartons, bottles, what looked like the skin of a dehydrated human being — obviously, on second thought, only the discarded skin of one of the things like the one I had deflated.

And a moldering pile of letters and papers.

Something caught my eye and I kicked through them. Yes, the letter I had written to my brother in Sioux Falls, unopened. *And which he had answered.*

My work.

The work I had done at the agency, important, creative work. There was my layout, the rough of the people with short, slim glasses, the parents, children, grandparents, the caption: Vodka is a Part of the American Tradition.

All of it lying here to rot.

Something made me look away from that terrible trash.

Sergeant stood in the entrance of Milady's, something bright in his hand.

Something happened.

I had been wrong.

The shining instrument had not been a hypodermic needle.

"YOU'RE tough," Sergeant said as I eased back into focus.

"You aren't, not without help," I told him in disgust.

"Spunky, aren't you? I meant mental toughness. That's the one thing we can never judge. I think you could have taken the shock right from the start. Of course, you would still have needed the conditioning to integrate properly."

"Conditioning? Conditioning?" It came out of me, vortexing up, outside of my piloting. "What have you done to my mind?"

"We've been trying to get it to grow back up," Sergeant said reasonably. "Think of this. Fountain

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of Youth. Immortality. Rejuvenation. This is it. Never mind how it works. Most minds can't stand being young and knowing they will have to go through the same damned thing all over again. We use synapse-shift to switch your upper conscious memories to your id and super-ego, leaving room for new memories. You remember only those things out of the past you *have* to, to retain your identity."

"Identity," I repeated. "I have no identity. My identity is a dream. I have two identities — one of them years beyond the other."

Sergeant tilted his head and his eyes at me and slapped me across the face. "Don't go back on me now. We gave you the best we could. The Rejuvenation Service couldn't help it if you were too old for a *beta*. You shouldn't have waited until you were so old, so very old. We used the very oldest sets and mock-ups we had for *betas*, but you, you had to keep wandering onto *alpha* territory, while they were striking sets, even. *Beta* or not, we gave you good service. Don't slip now."

I heard the voice and I heard another voice, and it said "What could you expect of a *beta?*" and they were only some of the voices I was hearing, and I wondered what you could expect from a *beta*, and I didn't know, or think that I would ever know.

— JIM HARMON

★★★★★

FORECAST

October — big month! At least four novelettes — maybe half a dozen short stories — all in all, an issue crammed with good reading.

For instance? Well, what about a fine new Fritz Leiber? The name of his October contribution is *The Beat Cluster*, a story about . . . (pause while editor fights against temptation — and loses) . . . a bunch of Beats who are Really Out of This World.

Or there's a great Cordwainer Smith novelette, perhaps his best ever: A Planet Named Shayol. Shayol turns out to be, indeed, another word for Hell.

But perhaps the really big story for October is *Arcturus Times Three*. It's the first of a series and, as you long-time addicts know, *Galaxy* has seldom been tempted into the dangers of publishing series stories. This one, though, has a premise too good to miss! Jack Sharkey is the writer; you'll be seeing a lot of him here.

Yes, indeed. Big month — big magazine. (More pages than any other in the field!) Don't miss October!

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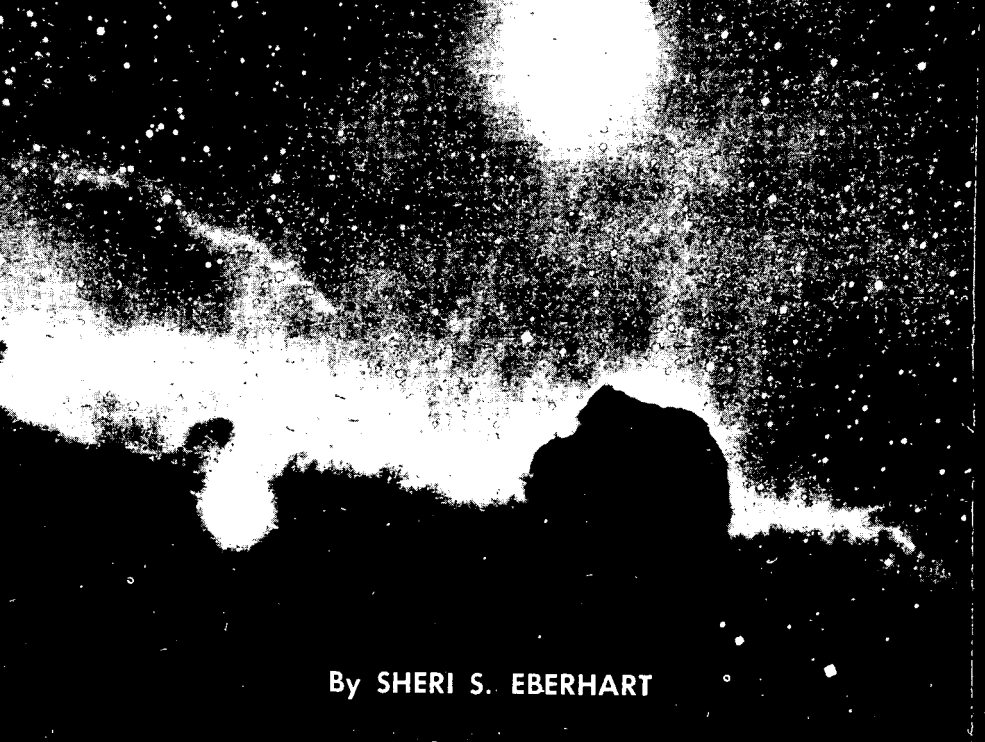

By SHERI S. EBERHART

EXTRATERRESTRIAL TRILOGUE ON TERRAN SELF-DESTRUCTION

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Three creatures sat on the sands of Mars,
and the first, to the ancient twiddling bars
that the second played on a twalreg flute
sang a canal lay most convolute,
while the third, with his horn in the sand, sat mute,
considering the stars.

At last the second stilled his fife,
and the third twonged out (his voice was rife
with a hint of fear) "Do you know that there,
where the third planet spins in its veil of air,
I'm convinced there's a spot, a jot, a hair,
a widge, perhaps, of life."

The first began an amusement dance,
while the second, fourth eyes crossed, askance,
skibbed with extreme severity,
"You ought to watch your tongues," quoth he.
"One should not affront the Deity
by mentioning such chance.

"For years our scientists have spent
their time in the establishment
of reasons why the life we know
could not exist above, below,
or anyplace but here! They show
that fact self evident."

Just then their eyes were caught, aghast,
for where the air-veiled planet passed
a ball of fire had blossomed wide,
and holocausts together vied
to rip the ravened globe aside
with nothing left at last.

Murmured the first, "You will allow,
by every old and sacred vow,
this proves my point and proves it well.
Those pyrotechnics must compel
you to recant!" The third said, "Hell,
it doesn't matter now."

And they sat back down on the sands of Mars
to hear the ancient, twiddling bars
of a Martian dirge or the twalreg flute,
in troches old and dissolute,
while the third, with his horn in the sand, sat mute,
considering the stars.

— SHERI S. EBERHART

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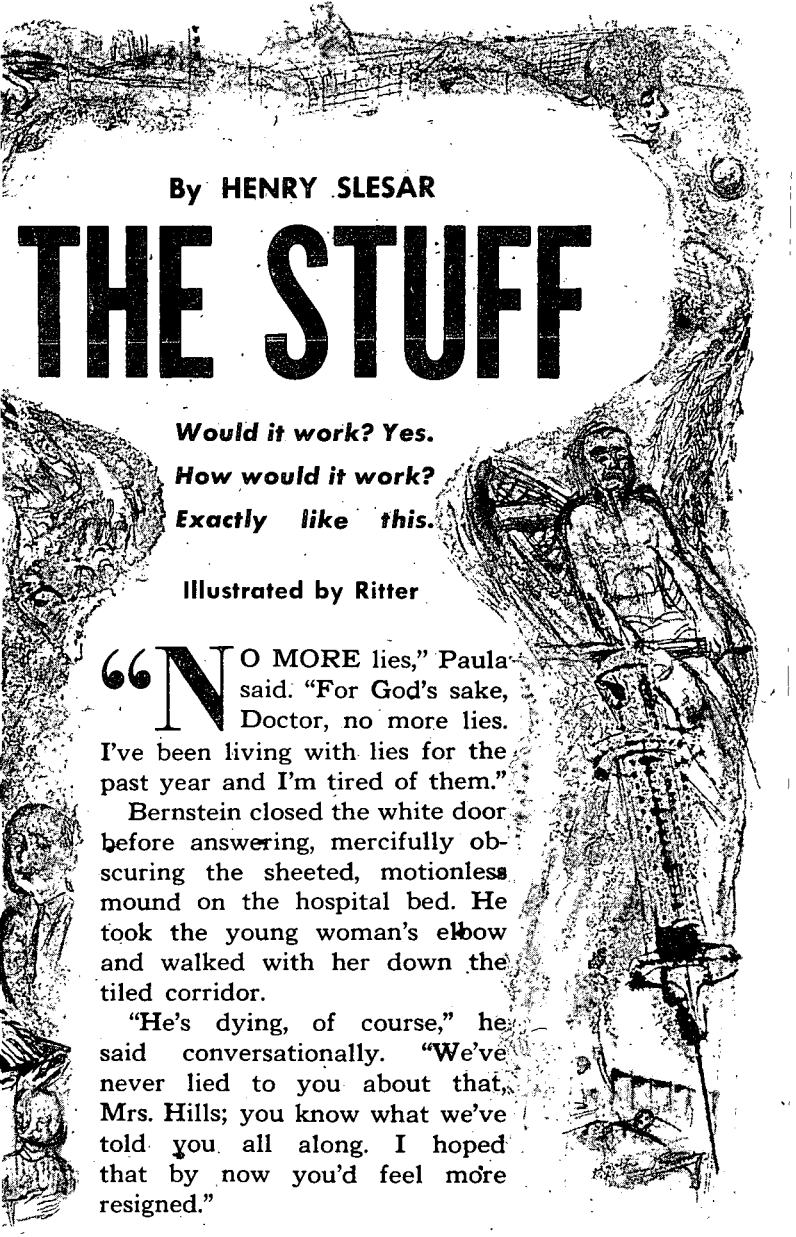
By HENRY SLESAR

THE STUFF

Would it work? Yes.
How would it work?
Exactly like this.

Illustrated by Ritter



"NO MORE lies," Paula said. "For God's sake, Doctor, no more lies. I've been living with lies for the past year and I'm tired of them."

Bernstein closed the white door before answering, mercifully obscuring the sheeted, motionless mound on the hospital bed. He took the young woman's elbow and walked with her down the tiled corridor.

"He's dying, of course," he said conversationally. "We've never lied to you about that, Mrs. Hills; you know what we've told you all along. I hoped that by now you'd feel more resigned."

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"I was," she said bitterly. They had stopped in front of Bernstein's small office and she drew her arm away. "But then you called me. About this drug of yours — "

"We had to call you. Senopoline can't be administered without permission of the patient, and since your husband has been in coma for the last four days — "

He opened the door and nodded her inside. She hesitated, then walked in. He took his place behind the cluttered desk, his grave face distracted, and waited until she sat down in the facing chair. He picked up his telephone receiver, replaced it, shuffled papers, and then locked his hands on the desk blotter.

"Senopoline is a curious drug," he said. "I've had little experience with it myself. You may have heard about the controversy surrounding it."

"No," she whispered. "I don't know about it. I haven't cared about anything since Andy's illness."

"At any rate, you're the only person in the world that can decide whether your husband receives it. It's strange stuff, as I said, but in the light of your husband's present condition, I can tell you this — it can do him absolutely no harm."

"But it will do him good?"

"There," Bernstein sighed, "is the crux of the controversy, Mrs. Hills."

* * *

ROW, row, row your boat, he sang in his mind, feeling the lapping tongues of the cool lake water against his fingers, drifting, drifting, under obeisant willows. Paula's hands were resting gently on his eyes and he lifted them away. Then he kissed the soft palms and pressed them on his cheek. When he opened his eyes, he was surprised to find that the boat was a bed, the water only pelting rain against the window, and the willow trees long shadows on the walls. Only Paula's hands were real, solid and real and comforting against his face.

He grinned at her. "Funniest damn thing," he said. "For a minute there, I thought we were back at Finger Lake. Remember that night we sprang a leak? I'll never forget the way you looked when you saw the hem of your dress."

"Andy," she said quietly. "Andy, do you know what's happened?"

He scratched his head. "Seems to me Doc Bernstein was in here a while ago. Or was he? Didn't they jab me again or something?"

"It was a drug, Andy. Don't you remember? They have this new miracle drug, senopoline. Dr. Bernstein told you about it, said it was worth the try . . . "

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"Oh, sure, I remember."

He sat up in bed, casually, as if sitting up in bed were an everyday occurrence. He took a cigarette from the table beside him and lit one. He smoked reflectively for a moment, and then recalled that he hadn't been anything but horizontal for almost eight months. Swiftly, he put his hand on his rib cage and touched the firm flesh.

"The girdle," he said wonderingly. "Where the hell's the girdle?"

"They took it off," Paula said tearfully. "Oh, Andy, they took it off. You don't need it any more. You're healed, completely healed. It's a miracle!"

"A miracle . . . "

She threw her arms about him; they hadn't held each other since the accident a year ago, the accident that had snapped his spine in several places. He had been twenty-two when it happened.

THEY released him from the hospital three days later; after half a year in the hushed white world, the city outside seemed wildly clamorous and riotously colorful, like a town at the height of carnival. He had never felt so well in his life; he was eager to put the strong springs of his muscles back into play. Bernstein had made the usual speech about rest, but a week after his discharge Andy and Paula were at the courts in tennis clothes.

Andy had always been a dedicated player, but his stiff-armed forehand and poor net game had always prevented him from being anything more than a passable amateur. Now he was a demon on the court, no ball escaping his swift-moving racket. He astounded himself with the accuracy of his crashing serves, his incredible play at the net.

Paula, a junior champion during her college years, couldn't begin to cope with him; laughingly, she gave up and watched him battle the club professional. He took the first set 6-0, 6-0, 6-0, and Andy knew that something more magical than medicinal had happened to him.

They talked it over, excited as schoolchildren, all the way home. Andy, who had taken a job in a stock-brokerage house after college, and who had been bored silly with the whole business until the accident, began wondering if he could make a career on the tennis court.

To make sure his superb playing wasn't a fluke, they returned to the club the next day. This time, Andy found a former Davis Cup challenger to compete with. At the end of the afternoon, his heart pounding to

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the beat of victory, he knew it was true.

That night, with Paula in his lap, he stroked her long auburn hair and said: "No, Paula, it's all wrong. I'd like to keep it up, maybe enter the Nationals, but that's no life for me. It's only a game, after all."

"Only a game?" she said mockingly. "That's a fine thing for the next top-seeded man to say."

"No, I'm serious. Oh, I don't mean I intend to stay in Wall Street; that's not my ambition either. As a matter of fact, I was thinking of painting again."

"Painting? You haven't painted since your freshman year. You think you can make a living at it?"

"I was always pretty good, you know that. I'd like to try doing some commercial illustration; that's for the bread and potatoes. Then, when we don't have to worry about creditors, I'd like to do some things on my own."

"Don't pull a Gauguin on me, friend." She kissed his cheek lightly. "Don't desert your wife and family for some Tahitian idyll . . . "

"What family?"

She pulled away from him and got up to stir the ashes in the fireplace. When she returned, her face was glowing with the heat of the fire and warmth of her news.

Andrew Hills, Junior, was born in September. Two years later, little Denise took over the hand-me-down cradle. By that time, Andy Hills was signing his name to the magazine covers of America's top-circulation weeklies, and they were happy to feature it. His added fame as America's top-ranked amateur tennis champion made the signature all the more desirable.

WHEN Andrew Junior was three, Andrew Senior made his most important advance in the field of art — not on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, but in the halls of the Modern Museum of Art. His first exhibit evoked such a torrent of superlatives that the *New York Times* found the reaction newsworthy enough for a box on the front page. There was a celebration in the Hills household that night, attended by their closest friends: copies of slick magazines were ceremoniously burned and the ashes placed in a dime-store urn that Paula had bought for the occasion.

A month later, they were signing the documents that entitled them to a sprawling hilltop house in Westchester, with a north-light glassed-in studio the size of their former apartment.

He was thirty-five when the urge struck him to rectify a

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sordid political situation in their town. His fame as an artist and tennis-champion (even at thirty-five, he was top-seeded in the Nationals) gave him an easy entree into the political melee. At first, the idea of vote-seeking appalled him; but he couldn't retreat once the movement started. He won easily and was elected to the town council. The office was a minor one, but he was enough of a celebrity to attract country-wide attention. During the following year, he began to receive visits from important men in party circles; in the next state election, his name was on the ballot. By the time he was forty, Andrew Hills was a U.S. Senator.

That spring, he and Paula spent a month in Acapulco, in an enchanting home they had erected in the cool shadows of the steep mountains that faced the bay. It was there that Andy talked about his future.

"I know what the party's planning," he told his wife, "but I know they're wrong. I'm not Presidential timber, Paula."

But the decision wasn't necessary; by summer, the Asiatic Alliance had tired of the incessant talks with the peacemakers and had launched their attack on the Alaskan frontier. Andy was commissioned at once as a major.

His gallantry in action, his brilliant recapture of Shaktolik, White Mountain, and eventual triumphant march into Nome guaranteed him a place in the High Command of the Allied Armies.

By the end of the first year of fighting, there were two silver stars on his shoulder and he was given the most critical assignment of all — to represent the Allies in the negotiations that were taking place in Fox Island in the Aleutians. Later, he denied that he was solely responsible for the successful culmination of the peace talks, but the American populace thought him hero enough to sweep him into the White House the following year in a landslide victory unparalleled in political history.

He was fifty by the time he left Washington, but his greatest triumphs were yet to come. In his second term, his interest in the World Organization had given him a major role in world politics. As First Secretary of the World Council, his ability to effect a working compromise between the ideological factions was directly responsible for the establishment of the World Government.

When he was sixty-four, Andrew Hills was elected World President, and he held the office until his voluntary retirement at seventy-five. Still active and vigorous, still capable of a commanding tennis game, of a paint-

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ing that set art circles gasping, he and Paula moved permanently into the house in Acapulco.

He was ninety-six when the fatigue of living overtook him. Andrew Junior, with his four grandchildren, and Denise, with her charming twins, paid him one last visit before he took to his bed.

* * *

"BUT WHAT *is* the stuff?" Paula said. "Does it cure or what? I have a right to know!"

Dr. Bernstein frowned. "It's rather hard to describe. It has no curative powers. It's more in the nature of a hypnotic drug, but it has a rather peculiar effect. It provokes a dream."

"A dream?"

"Yes. An incredibly long and detailed dream, in which the patient lives an entire lifetime, and lives it just the way he would like it to be. You might say it's an opiate, but the most humane one ever developed."

Paula looked down at the still figure on the bed. His hand was moving slowly across the bedsheet, the fingers groping toward her.

"Andy," she breathed. "Andy darling . . . "

His hand fell across hers, the touch feeble and aged.

"Paula," he whispered, "say goody-by to the children for me."

— HENRY SLESAR

WORLD S.F. CONVENTION NEWS

Science-fiction convention time is drawing near again. This time the place is Seattle, Washington; the date, Labor Day Weekend, September, 1961.

As we go to press, word is that the Guest of Honor is ROBERT A. HEINLEIN, famous author of *The Puppet Masters, The Year of the Jackpot* and scores of other great science-fiction stories from *Galaxy* and elsewhere. Heinlein is a reliable star performer on the speaking platform; you won't want to miss him.

This is every science-fiction reader's chance to meet and ask questions of a clear working majority of his favorite authors, editors, artists, fans and everybody else in the science-fiction field. For further information, write: SeaCon, c/o Seattle Science Fiction Club, Inc., P. O. Box 1365, Broadway Branch, Seattle 2, Washington.

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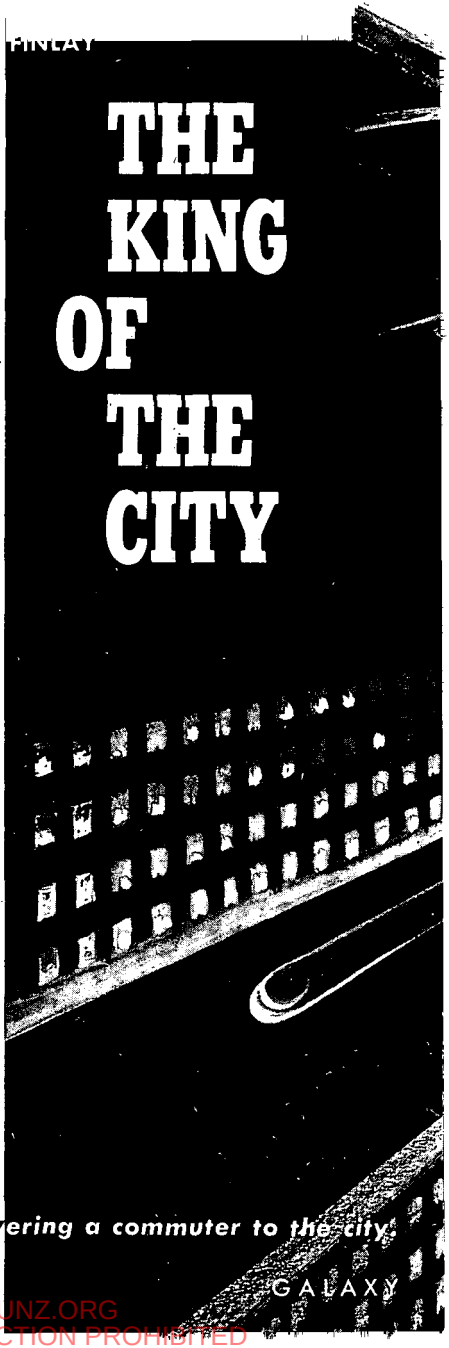
By KEITH LAUMER Illustrated by FINLAY

THE KING OF THE CITY



I STOOD in the shadows and looked across at the run-down lot with the wind-blown trash packed against the wire mesh barrier fence and the yellow glare panel that said HAUG ESCORT. There was a row of city-scarred hacks parked on the cracked ramp. They hadn't suffered the indignity of a wash-job for a long time. And the two-story frame building behind them — that had once been somebody's country house — now showed no paint except the foot-high yellow letters over the office door.

Inside the office a short broad man with small eyes and yesterday's beard gnawed a cigar and looked at me.

"Portal-to-portal escort cost you two thousand C's," he said. "Guaranteed."

"Guaranteed how?" I asked.

He waved the cigar. "Guaranteed you get into the city and back out again in one piece." He studied his cigar. "If somebody don't plug you first," he added.

"How about a one-way trip?"

"My boy got to come back out, ain't he?"

He was a sort of taxi-driver, delivering a commuter to the city.

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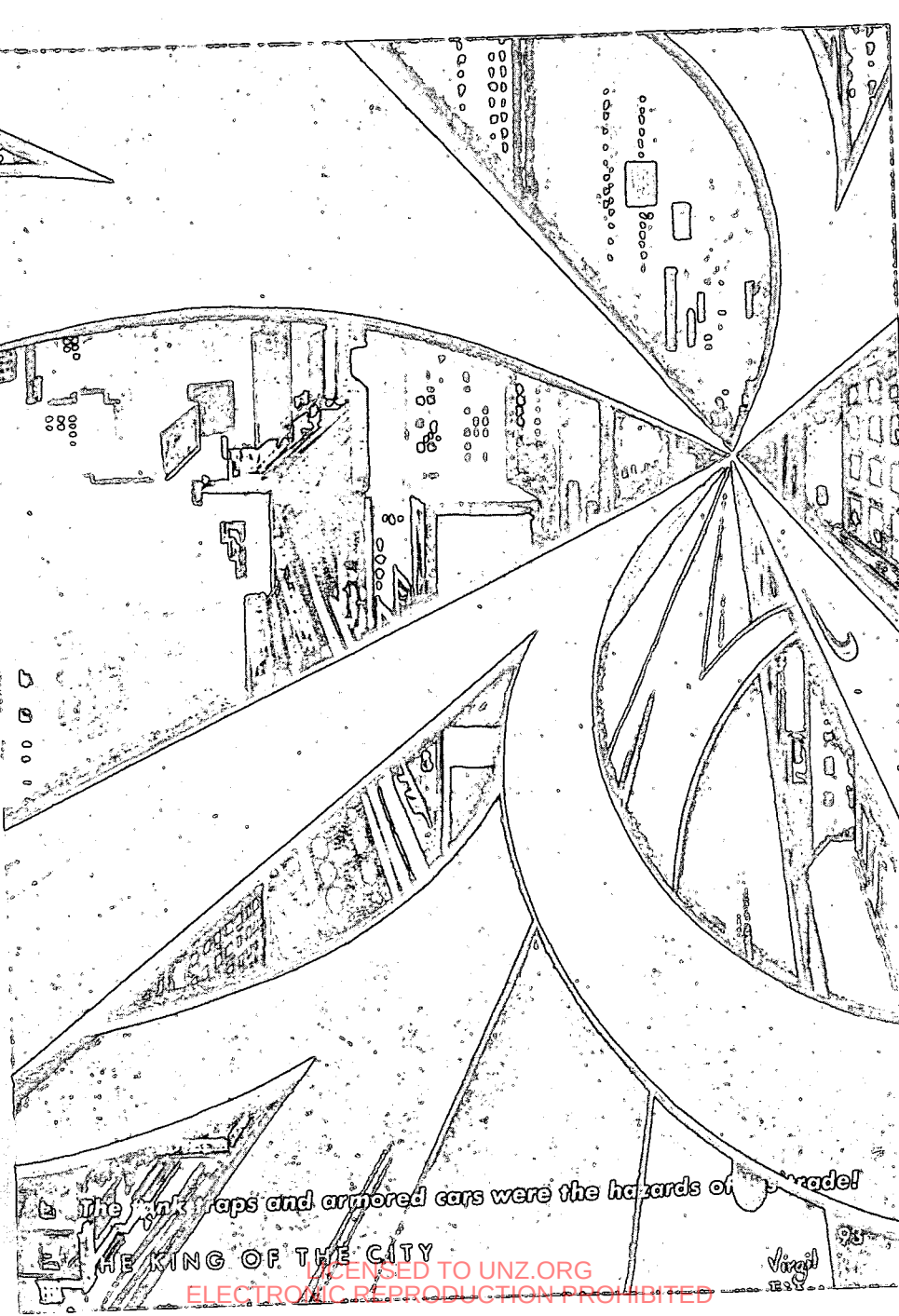

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I had spent my last brass ten-dollar piece on a cup of coffee eight hours before, but I had to get into the city. This was the only idea I had left.

"You've got me wrong," I said. "I'm not a customer. I want a job."

"Yeah?" He looked at me again, with a different expression, like a guy whose new-found girl friend has just mentioned a price.

"You know Gra'nyauk?"

"Sure," I said. "I grew up here."

He asked me a few more questions, then thumbed a button centered in a ring of grime on the wall behind him. A chair scraped beyond the door; it opened and a tall bony fellow with thick wrists and an adams apple set among heavy neck tendons came in.

The man behind the desk pointed at me with his chin.

"Throw him out, Lefty."

Lefty gave me a resentful look, came around the desk and reached for my collar. I leaned to the right and threw a hard left jab to the chin. He rocked back and sat down.

"I get the idea," I said. "I can make it out under my own power." I turned to the door.

"Stick around, mister. Lefty's just kind of a like test for separating the men from the boys."

"You mean I'm hired?"

He sighed. "You come at a good time. I'm short of good boys."

I helped Lefty up, then dusted off a chair and listened to a half-hour briefing on conditions in the city. They weren't good. Then I went upstairs to the chart room to wait for a call.

IT was almost ten o'clock when Lefty came into the room where I was looking over the maps of the city. He jerked his head.

"Hey, you."

A weasel-faced man who had been blowing smoke in my face slid off his stool, dropped his cigarette and smeared it under his shoe.

"You," Lefty said. "The new guy."

I belted my coat and followed him down the dark stairway, and out across the littered tarmac, glistening wet under the polyarcs, to where Haug stood talking to another man I hadn't seen before.

Haug flicked a beady glance my way, then turned to the stranger. He was a short man of about fifty with a mild expressionless face and expensive clothes.

"Mr. Stenn, this is Smith. He's your escort. You do like he tells you and he'll get you into the city and see your party and back out again in one piece."

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The customer looked at me. "Considering the fee I'm paying, I sincerely hope so," he murmured.

"Smith, you and Mr. Stenn take number 16 here." Haug patted a hinge-sprung hood, painted a bilious yellow and scabbed with license medallions issued by half a dozen competing city governments.

Haug must have noticed something in Stenn's expression.

"It ain't a fancy-looking hack, but she's got full armor, heavy-duty gyros, crash-shocks, two-way music and panic gear. I ain't got a better hack in the place."

Stenn nodded, popped the hatch and got in. I climbed in the front and adjusted the seat and controls to give me a little room. When I kicked over the turbos they sounded good.

"Better tie in, Mr. Stenn," I said. "We'll take the Canada turnpike in. You can brief me on the way."

I wheeled 16 around and out under the glare-sign that read "HAUG ESCORT." In the eastbound linkway I boosted her up to 90. From the way the old bus stepped off, she had at least a megahorse under the hood. Maybe Haug wasn't lying, I thought. I pressed an elbow against the power pistol strapped to my side.

I liked the feel of it there. Maybe between it and old 16 I could get there and back after all.

"MY destination," Stenn said, "is the Manhattan section."

That suited me perfectly. In fact, it was the first luck I'd had since I burned the uniform. I looked in the rear viewer at Stenn's face. He still wore no expression. He seemed like a mild little man to be wanting into the cage with the tigers.

"That's pretty rough territory, Mr. Stenn," I said. He didn't answer.

"Not many tourists go there," I went on. I wanted to pry a little information from him.

"I'm a businessman," Stenn said.

I let it go at that. Maybe he knew what he was doing. For me, there was no choice. I had one slim lead, and I had to play it out to the end. I swung through the banked curves of the intermix and onto the turnpike and opened up to full throttle.

It was fifteen minutes before I saw the warning red lights ahead. Haug had told me about this. I slowed.

"Here's our first roadblock, Mr. Stenn," I said. "This is an operator named Joe Naples. All he's after is his toll. I'll handle him; you sit tight in the hack. Don't say anything, don't do anything, no

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matter what happens. Understand?"

"I understand," Stenn said mildly.

I pulled up. My lights splashed on the spikes of a Mark IX tank trap. I set the parking jacks and got out.

"Remember what I told you," I said. "No matter what." I walked up into the beam of the lights.

A voice spoke from off to the side.

"Douse 'em, Rube."

I went back and cut the lights. Three men sauntered out onto the highway.

"Keep the hands away from the sides, Rube."

One of the men was a head taller than the others. I couldn't see his face in the faint red light from the beacon, but I knew who he was.

"Hello, Naples," I said.

He came up to me. "You know me, Rube?"

"Sure," I said. "The first thing Haug told me was pay my respects to Mr. Naples."

Naples laughed. "You hear that, boys? They know me pretty good on the outside, ha?"

HE looked at me, not laughing any more. "I don't see you before."

"My first trip."

He jerked a thumb at the hack. "Who's your trick?"

"A businessman. Name is Stenn."

"Yeah? What kind business?"

I shook my head. "We don't quiz the cash customers, Joe."

"Let's take a look." Naples moved off toward the hack, the boys at his side. I followed. Naples looked in at Stenn. Stenn sat relaxed and looked straight ahead. Naples turned away, nodded to one of his helpers. The two moved off a few yards.

The other man, a short bullet-headed thug in a grease-spatted overcoat, stood by the hack, staring in at Stenn. He took a heavy old-style automatic from his coat pocket, pulled open the door. He aimed the gun at Stenn's head and carefully squeezed the trigger.

The hammer clicked emptily.

"Ping," he said. He thrust the gun back in his pocket, kicked the door shut and went over to join Naples.

"Okay, Rube," Naples called.

I went over to him.

"I guess maybe you on the level," he said. "Standard fee. Five hundred, Old Federal notes."

I had to be careful now. I held a bland expression, reached in — slowly — took out my wallet. I extracted two hundred-C notes and held them out.

Naples looked at them, unmoving. The thug in the dirty overcoat moved up close, and sud-

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denly swung the edge of his palm at my wrist. I was ready; I flicked my hand aside and chopped him hard at the base of the neck. He dropped.

I was still holding out the money.

"That clown isn't worthy of a place in the Naples organization," I said.

Naples looked down at the man, stirred him with his foot.

"A clown," he said. He took the money and tucked it in his shirt pocket.

"Okay, Rube," he said. "My regards to Haug."

I got in the hack and moved up to the barrier. It started up, trundled aside. Naples was bending over the man I had downed. He took the pistol from the pocket of the overcoat, jacked the action and aimed. There was a sharp crack. The overcoat flopped once. Naples smiled over at me.

"He ain't worthy a place in the Naples organization," he said.

I waved a hand vaguely and gunned off down the road.

II

THE SPEAKER in my ear hummed.

I grunted an acknowledgement and a blurred voice said, "Smith, listen. When you cross the South Radial, pick up the Midwest Feed-off. Take it easy and watch for Number Nine Station. Pull off there. Got it?"

I recognized the voice. It was Lefty, Haug's Number One boy. I didn't answer.

"What was the call?" Stenn asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Nothing."

The lights of the South Radial Intermix were in sight ahead now.

I slowed to a hundred and thought about it. My personal motives told me to keep going, my job as a paid Escort was to get my man where he wanted to go. That was tough enough, without detours. I eased back up to one-fifty, took the Intermix with gyros screaming, and curved out onto the thruway.

The speaker hummed. "What are you trying to pull, wise guy?" He sounded mad. "That was the South Radial you just passed up—"

"Yeah," I said. "That's right. Smitty takes 'em there and he brings 'em back. Don't call us, we'll call you."

There was a long hum from the speaker. "Oh, a wiseacre," it said finally. "Listen, rookie, you got a lot to learn. This guy is bankrolled. I seen the wad when he paid Haug off. So all right, we cut you in. Now, get this . . ."

He gave me detailed instructions. When he was finished, I said, "Don't wait up for me."

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I took the speaker out of my ear and dropped it into the disposal slot. We drove along quietly for quite a while.

I was beginning to recognize my surroundings. This section of the turnpike had been opened the year before I left home. Except for the lack of traffic and the dark windows along the way it hadn't changed.

I was wondering just what Lefty's next move would be when a pair of powerful beams came on from the left, then pulled onto the highway, speeding up to pace me. I rocketed past before he had made full speed. I heard a loud spang, and glass chips scattered on my shoulder. I twisted and looked. A starred hole showed in the bubble, above the rear seat.

"DUCK!" I yelled. Stenn leaned over, put his head down.

The beams were gaining on me. I twisted the rear viewer, hit the I/R switch. A three-ton combat car, stripped, but still mounting twin infinite repeaters. Against that, old 16 was a kiddie car. I held my speed and tried to generate an idea. What I came up with wasn't good, but it was all I had.

A half a mile ahead there should be a level-split, one of those awkward ones that caused more than one pile-up in the first few months the turnpike was open. Maybe my playmates didn't know about it.

They were about to overtake me now. I slowed just a little, and started fading to the right. They followed me, crowding my rear wheel. I heard the spang again, twice, but nothing hit me. I was on the paved shoulder now, and could barely see the faded yellow cross-hatching that warned of the abutment that divided the pavement ahead.

I held the hack in the yellow until the last instant, then veered right and cleared the concrete barrier by a foot, hit the downcurve at a hundred and eighty in a howl of gyros and brakes — and the thunderous impact of the combat car.

Then I was off the pavement, fighting the wheel, slamming through underbrush, then miraculously back on the hard surface and coasting to a stop in the clear.

I took a deep breath and looked back. The burning remains of the car were scattered for a quarter of a mile along the turnpike. That would have been me if I had gauged it wrong.

I looked at the canopy of the hack. Three holes, not a foot apart, right where a passenger's head would be if he were sitting upright. Stenn was unconcernedly

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brushing glass dust from his jacket.

"Very neat, Mr. Smith," he said. "Now shall we resume our journey?"

"Maybe it's time you leveled with me, Stenn," I said.

He raised his eyebrows at me slightly.

"When Joe Naples' boy Friday pointed the gun at your head you didn't bat an eyelash," I said.

"I believe those were your instructions," Stenn said mildly.

"Pretty good for a simple businessman. I don't see you showing any signs of the shakes now, either, after what some might call a harrowing experience."

"I have every confidence in your handling —"

"Nuts, Stenn. Those three holes are pretty well grouped, wouldn't you say? The man that put them there was hitting where he was aiming. And he was aiming for you."

"Why me?" Stenn looked almost amused.

"I thought it was a little shakedown crew, out to teach me a lesson," I said. "Until I saw where the shots were going."

Stenn looked at me thoughtfully. He reached up and took a micro-speaker from his ear.

"The twin to the one you rashly disposed of," he said. "Mr. Haug was kind enough to supply it — for a fee. I must tell you that I had a gun in my hand as we approached the South Radial Intermix. Had you accepted the invitation to turn off, I would have halted the car, shot you and gone on alone. Happily, you chose to resist the temptation, for reasons of your own . . ." He looked at me inquiringly.

"Maybe I'm sap enough to take the job seriously," I said.

"That may possibly be true," Stenn said.

"What's your real errand here, Stenn? Frankly, I don't have time to get involved."

"Really? One wonders if you have irons in the fire, Smith. But never mind. I shan't pry. Are we going on?"

I gave him my stern penetrating look.

"Yeah," I said. "We're going on."

IN twenty minutes, we were on the Inner Concourse and the polyarcs were close together, lighting the empty sweep of banked pavement. The lights of the city sparkled across the sky ahead, and gave me a ghostly touch of the old thrill of coming home.

I doused that feeling fast. After eight years there was nothing left there for me to come home to. The city had a lethal welcome for intruders; it wouldn't be smart to forget that.

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I didn't see the T-Bird until his spot hit my eyes and he was beside me, crowding.

I veered and hit the brakes, with a half-baked idea of dropping back and cutting behind him, but he stayed with me. I had a fast impression of squealing metal and rubber, and then I was skidding to a stop up against the deflector rails with the T-Bird slanted across my prow. Its lid popped almost before the screech died away, and I was looking down the muzzles of two power pistols. I kept both hands on the wheel, where they could see them, and sat tight.

I wondered whose friends we had met this time.

Two men climbed out, the pistols in sight, and came up to the hack. The first one was a heavy-set Slavic type zipped into a tight G. I. weather suit. He motioned. I opened up and got out, not making any sudden movements. Stenn followed. A cold wind was whipping along the concourse, blowing a fine misty rain hard against my cheek. The polyarcs cast black shadows on gray faces.

The smaller man moved over to Stenn and crowded him back against the hack. The Slav motioned again, and I moved over by the T-Bird. He fished my wallet out and put it in his pocket without looking at it. I heard the other man say something to Stenn, and then the sound of a blow. I turned my head slowly, so as not to excite my watchdog. Stenn was picking himself up. He started going through his pockets, showing everything to the man with the gun, then dropping it on the ground. The wind blew cards and papers along until they soaked up enough water to stick. Stenn carried a lot of paper.

THE gunny said something and Stenn started pulling off his coat. He turned it inside out, and held it out. The gunny shook his head, and motioned to my Slav. He looked at me, and I tried to read his mind. I moved across toward the hack. I must have guessed right because he didn't shoot me. The Slav pocketed his gun and took the coat. Methodically, he tore the lining out, found nothing, dropped the ripped garment and kicked it aside. I shifted position, and the Slav turned and backhanded me up against the hack.

"Lay off him, Heavy," the other hood said. "Maxy didn't say nothing about this mug. He's just a Escort."

Heavy started to get his gun out again. I had an idea he was thinking about using it. Maybe that's why I did what I did. As his hand dipped into his pocket,

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I lunged, wrapped an arm around him and yanked out my own artillery. I held onto a handful of the weather suit and dug the pistol in hard. He stood frozen. Heavy wasn't as dumb as he looked.

His partner had backed a step, the pistol in his hand covering all of us.

"Drop it, Slim," I said. "No hard feelings, and we'll be on our way."

Stenn stood absolutely motionless. He was still wearing his mild expression.

"Not a chance, mug," the gunny said softly. No one moved.

"Even if you're ready to gun your way through your pal, I can't miss. Better settle for a draw."

"Maxy don't like draws, mister."

"Stenn," I said. "Get in the T-Bird. Head back the way we came, and don't slow down to read any billboards."

Stenn didn't move.

"GET going," I said. "Slim won't shoot."

"I employed you," Stenn said, "to take care of the heroics."

"If you've got any better ideas it's time to speak up, Stenn. This is your only out, the way I see it."

Stenn looked at the man with the gun.

"You referred to someone named 'Maxy.' Would that by any chance be Mr. Max Arena?"

Slim looked at him and thought about it.

"Could be," he said.

Stenn came slowly over to the Slav. Standing well out of the line of fire, he carefully put a hand in the loose pocket of the weather suit and brought out the pistol. I saw Slim's eyes tighten. He was having to make some tough decisions in a hurry.

Stenn moved offside, pistol in hand.

"Move away from him, Smith," he said.

I didn't know what he had in mind, but it didn't seem like the time to argue. I moved back.

"Drop your gun," he said.

I risked a glance at his mild expression.

"Are you nuts?"

"I came here to see Mr. Arena," he said. "This seems an excellent opportunity."

"Does it? I—"

"Drop it now, Smith. I won't warn you again."

I dropped it.

Slim swiveled on Stenn. He was still in an awkward spot.

"I want you to take me to Mr. Arena," Stenn said. "I have a proposition to put before him." He lowered the gun and handed it to Heavy.

It seemed like a long time

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until Slim lowered his gun.

"Heavy, put him in the back seat." He motioned me ahead, watched me as he climbed in the T-Bird.

"Nice friends you got, mug," he said. The T-Bird started up, backed, and roared off toward the city. I stood under the polyarcs and watched the tail glare out of sight.

Max Arena was the man I had come to the city to find.

III

OLD number 16 was canted against the deflector rail, one side shredded into curled strips of crumpled metal. I looked closer. Under the flimsy fairings, gray armor showed. Maybe there was more to Haug's best hack than met the eye. I climbed in and kicked over the starter. The turbos sounded as good as ever. I eased the gyros in; she backed off the rail with a screech of ripped metal.

I had lost my customer, but I still had wheels.

The smart thing to do now would be to head back out the turnpike to Haug's lot, turn in my badge and keep moving, south. I could give up while I was still alive. All I had to do was accept the situation.

I had a wide choice. I could sign on with the New Confeds, or the Free Texans, or any one of the other splinter republics trying to set up shop in the power vacuum. I might try to get in to one of the Enclaves and convince its Baron he needed another trained bodyguard. Or I could take a post with one of the kingpins in the city.

As a last resort I could go back and find a spot in the Naples organization. I happened to know they had a vacancy.

I was just running through mental exercises to hear myself think. I couldn't settle for the kind of world I had found when I touched planet three months back, after eight years in deep space with Hayle's squadron. When the Interim Administration shot him for treason, I burned my uniform and disappeared. My years in the Service had given me a tough hide and a knack for staying alive; my worldly assets consisted of the clothes I stood in, my service pistol and a few souvenirs of my travels. For two months I had been scraping along on the cash I had in my pocket, buying drinks for drifters in cheap bars, looking for a hint, any lead at all, that would give me a chance to do what had to be done. Max Arena was the lead. Maybe a dud lead — but I had to find out.

The city lights loomed just a few miles away. I was wasting

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time sitting here; I steered the hack out into the highway and headed for them.

APPARENTLY Lefty's influence didn't extend far beyond the South Radial. The two roadblocks I passed in the next five miles took my money, accepted my story that I was on my way to pick up a fare, said to say hello to Haug and passed me on my way.

Haug's sour yellow color scheme seemed to carry some weight with the town Organizations, too. I was well into the city, cruising along the third level Crossover, before I had any trouble. I was doing about fifty, watching where I was going and looking for the Manhattan Intermix, when a battered Gyrob four-seater trundled out across the fairway and stopped. I swerved and jumped lanes; the Gyrob backed, blocking me. I kicked my safety frame down and floorboarded the hack, steering straight for him. At the last instant he tried to pull out of the way.

He was too late.

I clipped him across his aft quarter, and caught a glimpse of the underside of the car as it stood on its nose, slammed through the deflector and over the side. Old 16 bucked and I got a good crack across the jaw from the ill-fitting frame, and then I was screeching through the Intermix and out onto the Manhattan Third level.

Up ahead, the glare panels at the top of the Blue Tower reared up half a mile into the wet night sky. It wasn't a hard address to find. Getting inside would be another matter.

I pulled up a hundred yards from the dark cave they used to call the limousine entrance and looked the situation over. The level was deserted — like the whole city seemed, from the street. But there were lights in the windows, level after level of them stretching up and away as far as you could see. There were plenty of people in the city — about ten million, even after the riots and the Food Scare and the collapse of legal government. The automated city supply system had gone on working, and the Kingpins, the big time criminals, had stepped in and set things up to suit their tastes. Life went on — but not out in the open. Not after dark.

I knew almost nothing about Arena. Judging from his employees, he was Kingpin of a prosperous outfit. The T-Bird was an expensive late model, and the two thugs handled themselves like high-priced talent. I couldn't expect to walk into his HQ without jumping a few hurdles. Maybe

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I should have invited myself along with Stenn and his new friends. On the other hand, there were advantages to arriving unannounced.

It was a temptation to drive in, with the hack's armor between me and any little surprises that might be waiting, but I liked the idea of staging a surprise of my own. I eased into drive and moved along to a parking ramp, swung around and down and stopped in the shadow of the retaining wall.

I set the brake and took a good look around. There was nothing in sight. Arena might have a power cannon trained on me from his bedroom window, for all I knew, but I had to get a toe into the water sometime. I shut down the turbo, and in the silence popped the lid and stepped out. The rain had stopped, and the moon showed as a bright spot on the high mist. I felt hungry and a little bit unreal, as though this were happening to somebody else.

I moved over to the side of the parking slab, clambered over the deflector rail and studied the shadows under the third level roadway. I could barely make out the catwalks and service ways. I was wondering whether to pull off my hard-soled shoes for the climb when I heard footsteps, close. I gauged the distance to the hack, and saw I couldn't make it. I got back over the rail and waited.

He came into sight, rangy, shock-haired and preternaturally thin in tight traditional dress.

When he got close I saw that he was young, in his early twenties at most. He would be carrying a knife.

"Hey, Mister," he whined. "Got a cigarette?"

"Sure, young fellow," I said, sounding a little nervous. I threw in a shaky laugh to help build the picture. I took a cigarette from a pack, put the pack back in my pocket, held the weed out. He strutted up to me, reached out and flipped the cigarette from my fingers. I edged back and used the laugh again.

"Hey, he liked that," the punk whined. "He thinks that's funny. He got a sense of humor."

"Heh, heh," I said. "Just out getting a little air."

"Gimme another cigarette, funny man."

I took the pack out, watching. I got out a cigarette and held it gingerly, arm bent. As he reached for it, I drew back. He snatched for it. That put him in position.

I dropped the pack, clenched my two hands together, ducked down and brought them up hard under his chin. He backflipped, rolled over and started crawling.

I let him go.

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I went over the rail without stopping to think it over and crossed the girder to the catwalk that ran under the boulevard above. I groped my way along to where the service way branched off for the Blue Tower, then stopped and looked up. A strip of luminous sky showed between the third level and the facade of the building. Anybody watching from the right spot would see me cross, walking on the narrow footway. It was a chance I'd have to take. I started to move out, and heard running feet. I froze.

The feet slid to a stop on the level above, a few yards away.

"What's up, Crackers?" somebody growled.

"The mark sapped me down."

THAT was interesting. I had been spotted and the punk had been sent to welcome me. Now I knew where I stood. The opposition had made their first mistake.

"He was starting to cross under when I spot him," Crackers went on, breathing heavily. "He saps me and I see I can't handle him and I go for help."

Someone answered in a guttural whisper. Crackers lowered his voice. It wouldn't take long now for reinforcements to arrive and flush me out. I edged farther and chanced a look. I saw two heads outlined above. They didn't seem to be looking my way, so I started across, walking silently toward a narrow loading platform with a wide door opening from it.

Below me, a lone light reflected from the wet pavement of the second level, fifty feet down; the blank wall of the Blue Tower dropped past it sheer to the glistening gutters at ground level. Then I was on the platform and trying the door.

It didn't open.

It was what I should have expected. Standing in the full light from the glare panel above the entry, I felt as exposed as a fan-dancer's navel. There was no time to consider alternatives. I grabbed my power pistol, flipped it to beam fire and stood aside with an arm across my face. I gave the latch a blast, then kicked the door hard. It was solid as a rock. Behind and above me, I heard Crackers yell.

I beamed the lock again, tiny droplets of molten metal spattering like needles against my face and hand. The door held.

"Drop it and lift 'em, mug," a deep voice yelled. I twisted to look up at the silhouettes against the deflector rail. I recognized the Slavic face of the man called Heavy. So he could talk after all.

"You're under my iron, mug," he called. "Freeze or I'll burn you."

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I believed him, but I had set something in motion that couldn't stop now. There was nothing to go back to; the only direction for me was on the way I was headed — deeper into trouble. I was tired of being the mouse in a cat's game. I had taken the initiative and I was keeping it.

I turned, set the power pistol at full aperture, and poured it to the armored door. Searing heat reflected from the barrier, smoke boiled, metal melted and ran. Through the stink of burning steel, I smelled scorched hair — and felt heat rake the back of my neck and hands. Heavy was beaming me at wide aperture, but the range was just too far for a fast kill. The door sagged and fell in. I jumped through the glowing opening, hit the floor and rolled to damp out my smouldering coat.

I got to my feet. There was no time now to stop and feel the pain of my burns. They would expect me to go up — so I would go down. The Blue Tower covered four city blocks and was four hundred stories high. There was plenty of room in it for a man to lose himself.

I ran along the corridor, found a continuous service belt and hopped on, lay flat, rode it through the slot. I came out into the light of the service corridor below, my gun ready, then down and around again. I saw no one.

It took ten minutes to cover the eighteen floors down to the sub-basement. I rolled off the belt and looked around.

The whole space was packed with automatics; the Blue Tower was a self-sufficient city in itself: I recognized generators, heat pumps, air plants. None of them were operating. The city services were all still functioning, apparently. What it would be like in another ten or twenty years of anarchy was anybody's guess. But when the city systems failed the Blue Tower could go on on its own.

Glare panels lit the aisles dimly. I prowled along looking for an elevator bank. The first one I found indicated the car at the hundred-eightieth floor. I went on, found another indicating the twentieth. While I watched, the indicator moved, started down. I was getting ready to duck when it stopped at the fifth. I waited; it didn't move.

I went around to the side of the bank, found the master switch. I went back, punched for the car. When the door whooshed open, I threw the switch.

I had to work fast now. I stepped into the dark car, reached up and slid open the access panel in the top, then jumped, caught the edge and pulled myself up.

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The glare panels inside the shaft showed me the pony power pack on top of the car, used by repairmen and inspectors when the main power was off. I lit a permatch to read the fine print on the panel. I was in luck. It was a through car to the four-hundredth. I pushed a couple of buttons, and the car started up. I lay flat behind the machinery.

As the car passed the third floor feet came into view; two men stood beyond the transparent door, guns in their hands, watching the car come up. They didn't see me. One of them thumbed the button frantically. The car kept going.

There were men at almost every floor now. I went on up, passed the hundredth floor, the one-fiftieth, and kept going. I began to feel almost safe — for the moment.

I was gambling now on what little I knew of the Blue Tower from the old days when all the biggest names congregated there. The top floor was a lavish apartment that had been occupied by a retired fleet admiral, a Vice-President and a uranium millionaire, in turn. If I knew anything about Kingpins, that's where Max Arena would hang his hat.

The elevator was slow. Lying there I had time to start thinking about my burned hide. My scalp was hit worst, and then my hands; and my shoulders were sticking to the charred coat. I had been travelling on adrenalin since Heavy had beamed me, and now the reaction was starting to hit.

It would have to wait; I had work to do.

Just below the three hundred and ninety-eighth floor I punched the button and the car stopped. I stood up, feeling dizzy. I grabbed for the rungs on the wall, hung on. The wall of the shaft seemed to sway . . . back . . .

Sure, I told myself. The top of the building sways fifteen feet in a high wind. Why shouldn't I feel it? I dismissed the thought that it was dead calm outside now, and started up the ladder.

It was a hard climb. I hung on tight, and concentrated on moving one hand at a time. The collar of my coat rasped my raw neck. I passed up the 398th and 9th — and rammed my head smack against a dead end. No service entry to the penthouse. I backed down to the 399th.

I found the lever and eased the door open, then waited, gun in hand. Nothing happened. I couldn't wait any longer. I pushed the door wide, stepped off into the hall. Still nobody in sight, but I could hear voices. To my left a discreet stair carpeted in violet velvet eased up in a

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gentle curve. I didn't hesitate; I went up.

The door at the top was an austere slab of bleached teak. I tried the polished brass lever; the door swung open silently, and I stepped across the threshold and was looking across a plain of honey-colored down at a man sitting relaxed in a soft chair of pale leather.

He waved a hand cheerfully. "Come on in," he said.

IV

MAX Arena was a broad-shouldered six-footer, with clean-shaven blue jaws, coarse gray-flecked black hair brushed back from a high forehead, a deeper tan than was natural for the city in November, and very white teeth. He was showing them now in a smile. He waved a hand toward a chair, not even glancing at the gun in my hand. I admired the twinkle of light on the polished barrel of a Norge stunner at his elbow and decided to ignore it too.

"I been following your progress with considerable interest," Arena said genially. "The boys had orders not to shoot. I guess Luvitch sort of lost his head."

"It's nothing," I said, "that a little skin graft won't clear up in a year or so."

"Don't feel bad. You're the first guy ever made it in here under his own steam without an invitation."

"And with a gun in his hand," I said.

"We won't need guns," he said. "Not right away."

I went over to one of the big soft chairs and sat down, put the gun in my lap.

"Why didn't you shoot as I came in?"

Arena jiggled his foot. "I like your style," he said. "You handled Heavy real good. He's supposed to be my toughest boy."

"What about the combat car? More friends of yours?"

"Nah," he said, chuckling easily. "Some Jersey boys heard I had a caller. They figured to knock him off on general principles. A nifty." He stopped laughing. "The Gyrob was mine; a remoted job. Nice piece of equipment. You cost me real dough tonight."

"Gee," I said. "That's tough."

"And besides," he said, "I know who you are."

I waited. He leaned over and picked something off the table. It was my wallet.

"I used to be in the Navy myself. Academy man, believe it or not. Almost, anyway. Kicked out three weeks before graduation. A frame. Well, practically a frame; there was plenty of guys doing what I was doing."

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"That where you learned to talk like a hood?"

For a second Arena almost didn't smile.

"I am perfectly capable of expressing myself like a little gentleman, when I feel so inclined," he said, "but I say to hell with it."

"You must have been before my time," I said.

"A year or two. And I was using a different name then. But that wasn't my only hitch with the Service. When the Trouble started, I enlisted. I wanted some action. When the Navy found out they had a qualified Power Section man on their hands, I went up fast. Within fourteen months I was a J. G. How about that?"

"Very commendable."

"So that's how I knew about the trick I. D. under the emulsion on the snapshot. You should have ditched it, Maclamore. Or should I say Captain Maclamore?"

MY mouth opened, but I couldn't think of a snappy answer to that one. I was in trouble. I had meant to play it by ear once I reached Arena to get the information I needed. That was out now. He knew me. He had topped my aces before I played them.

Suddenly Arena was serious. "You came to the right man, Maclamore. You heard I had one of your buddies here, right? I let the word leak; I thought it might bring more of you in. I was lucky to get Admiral Hayle's deputy."

"What do you want with me?"

Arena leaned forward. "There were eight of you. Hayle and his aide, Wolfgang, were shot when they wouldn't spill to the Provisional Government — or whatever that mob calls itself. Margan got himself killed in some kind of tangle near Denver. The other four boys pulled a fast one and ducked out with the scout you guys came back in. They were riding dry tanks — the scout had maybe thirty ton/hours fuel aboard — so they haven't left the planet. That leaves you stranded. With six sets of Federal law looking for you. Right?"

"I can't argue with what's in the newspapers," I said.

"Well, I don't know. I got a couple newspapers. But here's where I smell a deal, Maclamore. You want to know where that scout boat is. Played right, you figure you got a good chance of a raid on an arsenal or a power plant to pick up a few slugs of the heavy stuff; then you high-tail out, join up with the rest of the squadron and, with the ordnance you pack, you can sit off and dictate the next move." Arena leaned back and took a

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deep breath. His eyes didn't leave me.

"Okay. I got one of you here. I found out something from him. He gave me enough I know you boys got something up your sleeve. But he don't have the whole picture. I need more info. You can give it to me. If I like what I hear, I'm in a position to help — like, for example, with the fuel problem. And you cut me in for half. Fair enough?"

"Who is it you've got?"

He shook his head. "Uh-uh."

"What did he tell you?"

"Not enough. What was Hayle holding out? You birds found something out there. What was it?"

"We found a few artifacts on Mars," I said. "Not Martian in origin; visitors. We surveyed—"

"Don't string me, Maclamore. I'm willing to give you a fair deal, but if you make it tough for me—"

"How do you know I haven't got a detonator buried under my left ear," I said. "You can't pry information out of me, Arena."

"I think you want to live, Maclamore. I think you got something you want to live for. I want a piece of it."

"I can make a deal with you, Arena," I said. "Return me and my shipmate to our scout boat. Fuel us up. You might throw in two qualified men to help handle the ship — minus their blackjacks, preferably — then clear out. We'll handle the rest. And I'll remember, with gratitude."

Arena was silent for a long moment.

"YEAH, I could do that, Maclamore," he said finally. "But I won't. Max Arena is not a guy to pick up the crumbs — or wait around for handouts. I want in. All the way in."

"This time you'll have to settle for what you can get, Arena." I put the gun away and stood up.

I had a feeling I would have to put it over now or not at all.

"The rest of the squadron is still out there. If we don't show, they'll carry on alone. They're supplied for a century's operation. They don't need us."

That was true up to a point. The squadron had everything — except fuel.

"You figure you got it made if you can get your hands on that scout-boat," Arena said. "You figure to pick up fuel pretty easy by knocking off say the Lackawanna Pile."

"It shouldn't be too tough; a fleet boat of the Navy packs a wallop."

Arena tapped his teeth with a slim paper-cutter.

"You're worried your outfit will wind up Max Arena's private Navy, right? I'll tell you some-

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thing. You think I'm sitting on top of the world, huh? I own this town, and everybody in it. All the luxury and fancy dinners and women I can use. And you know what? I'm bored."

"And you think running the Navy might be diverting?"

"Call it whatever you want to. There's something big going on out there, and I don't plan to be left out."

"Arena, when I clear atmosphere, we'll talk. Take it or leave it."

The smile was gone now. Arena looked at me, rubbing a finger along his blue cheek.

"Suppose I was to tell you I know where your other three boys are, Maclamore?"

"Do you?" I said.

"And the boat," Arena said. "The works."

"If you've got them here, I want to see them, Arena. If not, don't waste my time."

"I haven't exactly got 'em here, Maclamore. But I know a guy that knows where they are."

"Yeah." I said.

Arena looked mad. "Okay, I'll give it to you, Maclamore. I got a partner in this deal. Between us we got plenty. But we need what you got, too."

"I've made my offer, Arena. It stands."

"Have I got your word on that, Maclamore?" He stood up and came over to stand before me. "The old Academy word. You wouldn't break that, would you Maclamore?"

"I'll do what I said."

Arena walked to his desk, a massive boulder of Jadeite, cleaved and polished to a mirror surface. He thumbed a key.

"Send him in here," he said.

I waited. Arena sat down and looked across at me.

Thirty seconds passed and then the door opened and Stenn walked in.

STENN glanced at me.

"Well," he said. "Mr. Smith."

"The Smith routine is just a gag," Arena said. "His name is — Maclamore."

For an instant, I thought I saw a flash of expression on Stenn's face. He crossed the room and sat down.

"Well," he said. "A very rational move, your coming here. I trust you struck a profitable bargain?" He looked hard at me, and this time there was expression. Hate, I would call it, offhand.

"Not much of a deal at that, Stenn," Arena said. "The captain is a tough nut to crack. He wants my help with no strings attached. I think I'm going to buy it."

"How much information has he given you?"

Arena laughed. "Nothing," he said. "Max Arena going for a

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deal like that. Funny, huh? But that's the way the fall-out fogs 'em."

"And what have you arranged?"

"I turn him loose, him and Williams. I figure you'll go along, Stenn, and let him have the three guys you got. Williams will tell him where the Scout boat is, so there's no percentage in your holding out."

"What else?"

"What else is there?" Arena spread his hands. "They pick up the boat, fuel up — someplace — and they're off. And the captain here gives me the old Academy word he cuts me in, once he's clear."

There was a long silence. Arena smiled comfortably; Stenn sat calmly, looking at each of us in turn. I crossed my fingers and tried to look bored.

"Very well," Stenn said. "I seem to be presented with a *fait accompli* . . ."

I let a long breath out. I was going to make it . . .

". . . But I would suggest that before committing yourself, you take the precaution of searching Mr. Maclamore's person. One never knows."

I could feel the look on my face. So could Arena.

"So," he said. "Another nifty." He didn't seem to move, but the stunner was in his hand. He wasn't smiling now, and the stunner caught me easily.

V

THE lights came on, and I blinked, looking around the room.

My mementos didn't look like much, resting in the center of Arena's polished half-acre of desk top. The information was stored in the five tiny rods, less than an inch long, and the projector was a flat polyhedron the size of a pillbox. But the information they contained was worth more than all the treasure sunk in all the seas.

"This is merely a small sample," Stenn said. "The star surveys are said to be unbelievably complete. They represent a mapping task which would require a thousand years."

"The angles," Arena said. "Just figuring the angles will take plenty time."

"And this is what you almost let him walk out with," Stenn said.

Arena gave me a slashing look.

"Don't let your indignation run away with you, Arena," Stenn said. "I don't think you remembered to mention the fuel situation to Mr. Maclamore, did you?"

Arena turned to Stenn, looming over the smaller man. "Maybe you better button your lip," he

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said quietly. "I don't like the way you use it."

"Afraid I'll lower you in the gentleman's esteem?" Stenn said. He looked Arena in the eye.

"Nuts to the gentleman's esteem," Arena said.

"You thought you'd squeeze me out, Arena," Stenn said. "You didn't need me any more. You intended to let Maclamore and Williams go and have them followed. There was no danger of an escape, since you knew they'd find no fuel."

He turned to me. "During your years in space, Mr. Maclamore, technology moved on. And politics as well. Power fuels could be used to construct bombs. Ergo, all stations were converted for short half-life secondaries, and the primary materials stored at Fort Knox. You would have found yourself fuelless and therefore helpless. Mr. Arena would have arrived soon thereafter to seize the scout-boat."

"What would he want with the boat without fuel?" I asked.

"Mr. Arena was foresighted enough to stock up some years ago," Stenn said. "I understand he has enough metal hoarded to power your entire squadron for an indefinite time."

"Why tell this guy that?" Arena asked. "Kick him to hell out of here and let's get busy. You gab too much."

"I see that I'm tacitly reinstated as a partner," Stenn said. "Most gratifying."

"Max Arena is no welcher," Arena said. "You tipped me to the tapes, so you're in."

"Besides which you perhaps sense that I have other valuable contributions to make."

"I figure you to pull your weight."

"What are your plans for Mr. Maclamore?"

"I told you. Kick him out. He'll never wise up and cooperate with us."

"First, you'd better ask him a few more questions."

"Why? So he'll blow his head off and mess up my rug, like . . ." Arena stopped. "You won't get anything out of him."

"A man of his type has a strong aversion to suicide. He won't die to protect trivial information. And if he does — we'll know there's something important being held out."

"I don't like messy stuff," Arena said.

"I'll be most careful," Stenn said. "Get me some men in here to secure him to a chair, and we'll have a nice long chat with him."

"No messy stuff," Arena repeated. He crossed to his desk, thumbed a lever and spoke to someone outside.

Stenn was standing in front of me.

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"Let him think he's pumping you," he hissed.

"Find out where his fuel is stored. I'm on your side." Then Arena was coming back, and Stenn was looking at me indifferently.

ARENA had overcome his aversion to messy stuff sufficiently to hit me in the mouth now and then during the past few hours. It made talking painful, but I kept at it.

"How do I know you have Williams?" I said.

Arena crossed to his desk, took out a defaced snapshot.

"Here's his I. D." he said. "Take a look." He tossed it over. Stenn held it up.

"Let me talk to him."

"For what?"

"See how he feels about it," I mumbled. I was having trouble staying awake. I hadn't seen a bed for three days. It was hard to remember what information I was supposed to get from Arena.

"He'll join in if you do," Arena said. "Give up. Don't fight. Let it happen."

"You say you've got fuel. You're a liar. You've got no fuel."

"I got plenty fuel, wise guy," Arena yelled. He was tired too.

"Lousy crook," I said. "Can't even cheat a little without getting caught at it."

"Who's caught now, swabbie?" Arena was getting mad. That suited me.

"You're a lousy liar, Arena. You can't hide hot metal. Even Stenn ought to know that."

"What else was in the cache, Maclamore?" Stenn asked — for the hundredth time. He slapped me — also for the hundredth time. It jarred me and stung. It was the last straw. If Stenn was acting, I'd help him along. I lunged against the wires, swung a foot and caught him under the ribs. He oofed and fell off his chair.

"Don't push me any farther, you small-time chiselers," I yelled. "You've got nothing but a cast brass gall to offer. There's no hole deep enough to hide out power metal, even if a dumb slob like you thought of it."

"Dumb slob?" Arena barked. "You think a dumb slob could have built the organization I did, put this town in his hip pocket? I started stock-piling metal five years ago — a year before the ban. No hole deep enough, huh? It don't need to be so deep when it's got two feet of lead shielding over it."

"So you smuggled a few tons of lead into the Public Library and filed it under Little Bo Peep."

"The two feet was there ahead of me, wisenheimer. Remember the Polaris sub that used to be

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drydocked at Norfolk for the tourists to rubberneck?"

"Decommissioned and sold for scrap," I said. "Years ago."

"But not scrapped. Rusted in a scrapyard for five years. Then I bought her — beefed up her shielding — loaded her and sank her in ten fathoms of water in Cartwright Bay."

"That," Stenn said, "is the information we need."

Arena whirled. Stenn was still sitting on the floor. He had a palm gun in his hand, and it was pointed at the monogram on Arena's silk shirt.

"A cross," Arena said. "A lousy cross . . ."

"MOVE back, Arena." Stenn got to his feet, eyes on Arena.

"Where'd you have the stinger stashed?"

"In my hand. Stop there."

Stenn moved over to me. Eyes on Arena, he reached for the twisted ends of wire, started loosening them.

"I don't want to be nosey," I said. "But just where the hell do you fit into this, Stenn?"

"Naval Intelligence," Stenn said.

Arena cursed. "I knew that name should have rung a bell. Vice Admiral Stenn. The papers said you got yours when the Navy was purged."

"A few of us eluded the net."

Arena heaved a sigh.

"Well, fellows," he said — and jumped.

Stenn's shot went wild, and Arena left-hooked him down behind the chair. As he followed, Stenn came up fast, landed a hard left, followed up, drove Arena back. I yanked at my wires. Almost —

Then Arena, a foot taller, hammered a brutal left-right, and Stenn sagged. Carefully Arena aimed a right cross to the jaw. Stenn dropped.

Arena wiped an arm across his face.

"The little man tried, Mister. Let's give him that."

He walked past my chair, stooped for Stenn's gun. I heaved, slammed against him, and the light chair collapsed as we went over. Arena landed a kick, then I was on my feet, shaking a slat loose from the dangling wire. Arena stepped in, threw a whistling right. I ducked it, landed a hard punch to the midriff, another on the jaw. Arena backed, bent over but still strong. I couldn't let him rest. I was after him, took two in the face, ducked a haymaker that left him wide open just long enough for me to put everything I had in an uppercut that sent him back across his fancy desk. He sprawled, then slid onto the floor.

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I went to him, kicked him lightly in the ribs.

"Where's Williams," I said. I kept kicking and asking. After five tries, Arena shook his head and tried to sit up. I put a foot in his face and he relaxed. I asked him again.

"You didn't learn this kind of tactics at the Academy," Arena whined.

"It's the times," I said. "They have a coarsening effect."

"Williams was a fancy-pants," Arena said. "No guts. He pulled the stopper."

"Talk plainer," I said, and kicked him again, hard — but I knew what he meant.

"Blew his lousy head off," Arena yelled. "I gassed him and tried scop on him. He blew. He was out cold, and he blew."

"Yeah," I said. "Hypnotics will trigger it."

"Fancy goddam wiring job," Arena muttered, wiping blood from his face.

I got the wire and trussed Arena up. I had to clip him twice before I finished. I went through his pockets, looked at things, recovered my souvenirs. I went over to Stenn. He was breathing.

Arena was watching. "He's okay, for crissake," he said. "What kind of punch you think I got?"

I hoisted Stenn onto my shoulder.

"So long, Arena," I said. "I don't know why I don't blow your brains out. Maybe it's that Navy Cross citation in your wallet."

"Listen," Arena said. "Take me with you."

"A swell idea," I said. "I'll pick up a couple of tarantulas, too."

"You're trying for the hack, right?"

"Sure. What else?"

"The roof," he said. "I got six, eight rotos on the roof. One high-speed job. You'll never make the hack."

"Why tell me?"

"I got eight hundred gun boys in this building alone. They know you're here. The hack is watched, the whole route. You can't get through."

"What do you care?"

"If the boys bust in here after a while and find me like this . . . They'll bury me with the wires still on, Maclamore."

"How do I get to the roof?"

He told me. I went to the right corner, pushed the right spot, and a panel slid aside. I looked back at Arena.

"I'll make a good sailor, Maclamore," he said.

"Don't crawl, Arena," I said. I went up the short stair, came out onto a block-square pad.

Arena was right about the rotos. Eight of them. I picked the four-place Cad, and got Stenn tied in. He was coming to, mut-

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tering. He was still fighting Arena, he thought.

". . . I'll hold . . . you . . . get out . . ."

"Take it easy, Stenn," I said. "Nothing can touch this bus. Where's the boat?" I shook him. "Where's the boat, Stenn?"

He came around long enough to tell me. It wasn't far — less than an hour's run.

"Stand by, Admiral," I said. "I'll be right back."

"Where . . . you . . ."

"We need every good man we can get," I said. "And I think I know a guy that wants to join the Navy."

EPILOGUE

ADMIRAL Stenn turned away from the communicator screen.

"I think we'd be justified in announcing victory now, Commodore." As usual, he sounded like a professor of diction, but he was wearing a big grin.

"Whatever you say, chief," I said, with an even sappier smile.

I made the official announcement that a provisional Congress had accepted the resignations of all claims by former office holders, and that new elections would be underway in a week.

I switched over to Power Section. The NCO in charge threw me a snappy highball. Damned if he wasn't grinning too.

"I guess we showed 'em who's got the muscle, Commodore," he said.

"Your firepower demonstration was potent, Max," I said. "You must have stayed up nights studying the tapes."

"We've hardly scratched the surface yet," he said.

"I'll be crossing back to *Alaska* now, Mac," Stenn said.

I watched him move across the half-mile void to the flagship. Five minutes later the patrol detail broke away to take up surveillance orbits. They would be getting all the shore leave for the next few years, but I was glad my squadron had been detailed to go with the flagship on the Deep Space patrol. I wanted to be there when we followed those star surveys back to where their makers came from. Stenn wasn't the man to waste time, either. He'd be getting under way any minute. It was time to give my orders. I flipped the communicator key to the squadron link-up.

"Escort Commander to Escort," I said. "Now hear this . . ."

—KEITH LAUMER

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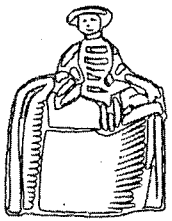
RETURN ENGAGEMENT



By LESTER DEL REY

Something had been lost. He couldn't find it anywhere on Earth — for it was elsewhere!

IT was later than Daniel Shawn had thought when they finally came out of the little farmhouse and headed for the big car of Tommy Rogers. It was almost sundown. And there had been a light rain.

He took a slow breath, almost tasting the vigor of the air.

Strange that it should be late, though. Time had seemed to go so slowly. The whole visit of Professor Rogers had been a mistake that was hard on both of them. Now it was ending clumsily, as it had begun and continued in awkwardness. Once Tommy had been his friend. But that was before Tommy went into Administration and Shawn had given it all up to come back here to the little Minnesota farm where he had been born.

"A rainbow!" Tommy exclaimed suddenly. "I haven't seen one in years."

"Nor missed it, I'll warrant," Shawn guessed, raising his eyes to see it. It lay in the gap between the locust trees, adding a jeweled light to their dark greenness.

Tommy laughed his adminis-

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trator's unoffended laugh and glanced back over the little farmyard before climbing into the car. "What do you find here, Dan? Kerosene lamps, outdoor plumbing, not even a radio. I still say it's no place for you — when you could take over the Chair of History if you'd be sensible."

"I was born here," Shawn replied, evading the part of the question he didn't want to answer.

"But that was forty-five years ago!"

Shawn nodded. "Yes. And sometimes, I think, so was the reality of myself. Let it be, Tommy, and I'll ride into Utica with you."

Tommy couldn't let it go, of course. There was that in the man which hated any way of life he could not understand. Maybe that was why he'd once studied sociology, only to find that the science could never supply enough answers. He repeated his question as the motor started.

"I don't know," Shawn answered slowly, fumbling for his pipe as he tried again to answer it to himself. "Something I almost saw as a child and then lost. Maybe all of us lost it once. That's why I turned to history, to find where it went. But I never found it. You used to do a lot of reading once, Tommy. You tell me. What was in Spencer, in Coleridge a little, in *Orlando* — only like an echo, but now it's gone from all our writing."

"I never thought there was anything like that," Tommy said flatly.

Shawn sighed. He should have known the answer that was a part of the man. Then they reached the little village, no more than a mile from the farm. He got out, putting out a hand.

BUT Tommy wasn't ready to end it yet. "If you're going to eat here, I'll join you," he suggested.

Shawn shrugged, then nodded. He was sorry that he had given in to the man's importunings over the phone and let him make the useless drive from Chicago. There should have been an end to it now. Yet Shawn had intended to dine here, since his own cooking was no better than it should be.

He picked up tobacco and the paper at a little store before leading the other to the restaurant beside the gas station. They ordered and waited for the food, with nothing to say between them.

The paper, Shawn saw from the headlines, had been another mistake, but he glanced at it while consuming the tasteless food. There was a dark ugliness to the news. As there always was.

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The lilt of life was lacking in every part of it. It was heavy and ponderous, even when it tried to be witty. And around him, the few diners were filled with a heaviness that made their laughter a deliberate effort and gave them no pleasure in the stories they told endlessly to each other.

"Why?" Shawn asked abruptly, pointing to the headlines. "You're still a sociologist, Tommy. Tell me, why all the dark ugliness?"

For a moment, it seemed that there was a measure of understanding in the man. He sighed. "Sociologists don't know much more about the present cultural matrix than anyone else, Dan. Too much technology, maybe, before the culture can absorb it. Or maybe this is just one of the plateaus in an evolution toward a sense of group maturity."

"Maturity?" Shawn questioned bitterly.

"It could be." And now the administrator's optimism was creeping back into the face. "Oh, I know, there's still hate and ugly conflict. But think of the earlier ages, Dan. Look at the superstitious panics, the persecutions, the witch-burnings. There was a time when anything different from what was considered human was to be killed on sight. Children ostracize or fight with anyone who differs from the group norm. Seems to me we've improved a lot in that respect — at least in this country. We're trying to understand other peoples. Why right now, Dan, if little green men got out of a saucer, most people would be delighted to meet them. Lots of men are hoping to find alien races — look at Project Ozma. Or look at the case of that priest who is writing about the question of redemption for non-human beings. If there were werewolves today, I'll bet that there'd be a lot more scientific interest in them than fear or hatred. There wouldn't even be any persecution of witches, unless they went in for criminal activity. That could be considered a form of maturity."

Or maybe the human race was so unconsciously sick of its own sordidness that it would welcome even alien relief, Shawn thought.

But he let the conversation die. There was as little answer to the problem in sociology as in history — as he had known all along.

He went out with Tommy at last, putting out his hand awkwardly in silence as the other reached his car.

"You sure you won't come back, Dan?" Tommy asked for the last time. "You're definitely turning President Schuyler down?"

"I won't come back, Tommy."

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He stepped back from the car and stood watching it drive away. Then he sighed and dismissed the whole unfortunate business from his mind.

IT was already so far into dusk that the stars were shining as he turned to walk homeward. The Moon was full and startlingly white in the dark sky. Wisps of clouds fleeced its path. The night was going to be one of loveliness. For a moment he was glad he had ridden in, since it gave him an excuse to travel back through the beauty of it.

The road went across the railroad tracks that led to all the earth, and yet the rails seemed to lead nowhere in the moonlight. It carried him on, past the school where once a teacher had touched his mind, then past the old cemetery, shaded with hollows of darkness. For a moment, there was a touch of the spiritual hush he had felt long before as he moved by the quiet place. Then it was shattered by a coarse laugh, and a burst of smut-tinged words of a juke song on a transistor radio.

Superstition was dying, as Tommy had said. At least, the older superstitious fear of things in the night. But the darkness of it was being replaced by an even darker veil of sordid ugliness.

Even the dead had no peace. A couple had found the retreat for their own use, but without even the respect of silence. And maybe these dead could never feel the lack, if they could know. Yet he felt his soul rubbed in dirt as he guessed the ages of the couple. They were using the time for what should have been an opening outward in them for things better reserved for later years.

The houses thinned out and were behind him, except for a single light back from the road half a mile ahead. Here the land dipped down, carrying the road with it. It had been a graveled road once. Shawn missed the sound of the pebbles. But the Moon was the same he had known long ago, its light like a kiss across the fields. Even crops cultivated by great machines instead of horses could take on a difference in the silvering from above.

Where had men lost whatever they had lost? History had taught him nothing, though he had searched. And the keys in literature were too elaborately carved to fit the lock. Books were written to bury the feelings of a past generation, not to reveal what might be happening in the present.

There had been a magic in men once. Oh, to be sure, it had been rare enough, and whole areas has missed it. Rome had been

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mighty in valor without it. Much of Greece had lost it, though it lay somewhere in the soft hint of legends older than Olympus. But there had been Persia. There had been Queen Maev and the Isle of Avalon, the sea warriors of Ys and the dreams that misted across man's rise from a beast. No time had ever been without it before.

YET this time was lacking whatever it was. Save for a few bits borrowed from the past in Yeats, there was no song or dream in the poetry now; and nobody even read poetry to look for such things. The art was as ugly and machine-symboled as the thoughts of the little minds that made it.

The music was noise and the only legend was the legend of power.

A car filled with teen-agers passed him. The top was down, but none of them were seeing the moonlight.

Shawn passed the sandstone ridge at the edge of his farm, lifted a wire gate and left the road. The woods still stretched along the road. They were his woods, as they had been once when he was a boy. There, along the little rutted trail through them, was the hazel bush, or one like the one he remembered. The wild grapes were ripe and sweet, beaded with the rain or dew. He tasted them and went meditatively on.

There *had* been a lilting in a few men's thoughts once — enough to lighten the others, and to echo still, faintly, out of the filter of older literature and legendry. It had gone. Maybe the industrial revolution? But that was a poor answer, since the revolution had touched only lightly on much of the world, yet the wonder had vanished just as quickly. Maybe the drive toward power? And yet, there had been power before without the death of the glamyr he could sense without defining.

Something had gone out of men. In its place was only the body of man's work — the machines, the dark forces that drove him on to bombs and destiny, the rockets that could lift him toward outer space but hide the dancing of the stars. Hundreds of years before, the lilt — and there was no other word — had vanished.

History had failed to show a reason why.

Shawn had come back here, looking for the threads he had lost in childhood. He was still seeking them. He walked on through the stubble left from the harvested barley . . . and something seemed to whisper in his veins.

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THERE was the feeling in him that he should go on. He went, past the sagging barn and down the lane toward the orchard. The pump at the old well creaked and gave forth water that was reddened with rust, but cold and tingling on his palate. He stopped to pluck an apple from an unpruned tree and munched on it.

And now the tingling was stronger, and there was a faint singing of the blood in his ears, as if a horn were being blown somewhere. It became louder as he crossed a stile into the meadow.

The grass was faintly damp. There was the smell of clover in the air, over the faint, rich musk of the earth itself. He moved across it, listening to the bending of the grass and the soft scuttling sounds of the little creatures that lived in it. From a pond beyond the orchard lane, the croaking of frogs reached him, the eerie call of a screech owl, the chirping of crickets.

The bugling of the strange excitement in his mind was stronger now.

He headed for the little dip near the center of the meadow. As a boy, he had lain there in the sunlight out of the wind and read *Princess of Mars* and Haggard and Dunsany, or crouched in the moonlight at times when he was too restless to sleep and too filled with unremembered plans. It was too damp now for a man of forty-five to return to the earth, but the spot drew him.

And then he saw the thing, centered in the spot toward which he was headed, and his heart seemed to leap with shock and then with expectancy.

He moved to it slowly.

He tried to tell himself it was something left behind by some wooing couple or as a practical joke by his neighbors. But he knew better.

It looked like a shell made of something milky-white. Half was almost buried in the grass. The other half of the opened shell was resting backwards against a rock. It seemed to be lined with a softness like the packed down of a milkweed pod. And it was perhaps eight feet long.

But it was the sweep of the lines and the rightness of the form that held his eyes. There was a fluting of the milky substance that lifted something in him as he had felt it lift before at an ancient jade screen or a phrase of Mozart.

There was no mark to show how it had come there. It must have been after the rain, since the lining was dry and soft to his touch.

Inevitably, he thought of flying saucers. But he threw the idea

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out of his mind, like a man brushing dirt from himself. The ugliness of the times was reflected in the pitiful situation where men's dreaming of better things led only to the banality of the cults. And of all the cults, the flying saucer ones were the least alive with a spark of the — lilt.

Yet he knew without questioning that this thing had never been shaped on Earth.

And as if to confirm his idea, his eyes caught sight of a design that was revealed softly in the moonlight against the lid of the shell. He bent to see it, but it was still too dim.

Finally, as he had known he was going to do, he kicked off his wet shoes and stepped into the hollow of the padding, letting himself down gently until his eyes were near the carving.

MOONLIGHT shone gently through the lid, making it hard to be sure of details. But somehow, his eyes filled with the figure. It was a woman — or rather, not a woman, since the features were planed as no human face could be. A strange woman, thinner than any human and more supple, from the dance in which she was frozen. The final proof of lack of humanity lay in the hair that rippled from her head and grew into a double crest on her back, spreading outwards across each of her shoulders, but standing well above her skin.

And suddenly, her hand seemed to move!

Shawn blinked. But it had been no illusion. The carved fingers opened and the arm moved toward him, just as the lid began to move inward to close the shell. There was a dancing cloud of motes that sprang from her hand and sped toward him. He lifted his arms, but it was too late. The gleaming motes struck his eyes, and they closed.

Gentle waves of sleep washed across his brain. He had only time to feel the shell lift somehow and ride upwards into the moonlight before the sleep claimed him completely. . .

There was a sense of the passage of time, eventually. His eyes would not open, but he lay somewhere that was not on Earth, and he could sense that hours had passed. Hours, he thought. Not days or weeks, but only hours.

Around him, there was a stirring. He could sense that the shell was gone, and there was an alien but earthy odor in his nostrils. Now sounds came — voices — but no voices he had ever heard. There was a silvery quality to them, like the voices of children mysteriously robbed of the harsh overtones of childish screams. These were almost

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liquid. Yet he could sense a frenzy and worry in them. In the background, there was a chanting, and the heart inside him seemed to be crying at is ended.

He tried to sit up and open his eyes, but his mind was still not in control of his body. Some sign must have shown, however. There was a gentle touch on his forehead, and a few words obviously meant to be soothing. The words held a hint of familiarity, but he could understand none of them.

"Where am I?" he asked.

There was a sigh near him, and another voice answered. It was a strong, masculine voice with a power of command and responsibility behind it, even though there were no really deep tones. "You would call it Mars," the words came in oddly accented English.

"Mars? In a few hours?" Yet as Shawn protested, he sensed the rightness of the answer. The weight of him was little more than a third that which he had always known.

The voice was sober and somehow withdrawn. "Our ways are not your ways, man. Our science means as little to you as yours to us. We accept the way of the universe where you bend the laws of nature against themselves. Who shall say which is better? Yet for this one thing of moving beyond the distances you know, we have ways you have not."

"Yet you speak English."

"There have been others before you. Not many." The voice was falling, like the ending of an organ note. "So few. And now . . . " It died away, and then resumed more normally. "But enough. We go to confer. Use the time until we return as you will."

There were rustlings again, and then light shone weakly through Shawn's lids. Something touched his face, and he found his eyes opening. This time when he tried to sit up, his body obeyed, though the motion was awkward in the unfamiliar pull of the planet.

A DREAM, he told himself. A fantasy. He'd wake in the morning wet and soaked in the meadow, sneezing with a cold from exposure.

But he knew better. A dream like this could be none of his making. There were elements in it, as he stared about, that could never have come from his mind.

There wasn't much to see. He was in a room that must have been carved from colored rock, and there was a sense of a great many feet of similar rock above him. The light seemed to be in the air itself, diffused and softly silver over everything. He lay on

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what must be a couch, but a couch with soft curves an dornaments no man could have planned. And beyond him was a fountain.

It was a tiny fountain, carved out of the wall of rock, with a thin spray of water falling over into a basin, making a soft tinkling sound. In front of the basin was the carving of a kneeling girl. This time there was only a hint of the shoulder crests of hair, but the green of the stone made the other features easier to see. No human artist could have fashioned that, and no human model could have posed for it. The girl was beautiful, but it was as if she came from a race that had descended from something related to the lighter monkeys, as man claimed descent from a great anthropoid ancestor of himself and the gorilla.

Then, without warning, a curtain seemed to fall across the room. It cut off most of it, leaving him with only a little space before the couch. But if the blackness was of cloth, it fell without a rustle. And behind it was the stirring of others moving into the room and finding places.

Behind the screen, the voice he took to be that of a leader began again. "What are you called, man? I am Porreos, a prince of my people."

"Danny," Shawn answered. His own response surprised him. He'd not called himself that since his childhood. But he let it stand.

"Then, Danny, we have conferred. And we feel you are better for not seeing us, since you cannot remain with us. We are sorry to have brought you here, though it is too late to alter that. But you will be returned."

Shawn puzzled over it, finding no logic to the decision. Why couldn't he remain? Why pick him up and bring him over all the distance for nothing but this? And why had the shell been on Earth in the first place?

He did not think he had spoken aloud, but Porreos sighed and began to answer. "We had hoped for a child of your race, Danny. One who could learn to live with us, as you could never do here. And the call of the shell was set for the yearning of one of your children. Strange that you should have answered. As strange as the shells that have returned to us empty. It has been so long . . ."

AGAIN it was the fading of an organ note. And behind it came the hint of a wailing song in many voices, a snatch of group response that cut into Shawn's nerves and brought tears to his eyes, though he could understand none of it. There was a delicacy here, a lack of strength and force, that hardly matched a race able

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to span space at the breathtaking speed of the shells.

The air around him was almost as thick as that of Earth, and there had been a fountain of water. It fitted no picture of Mars, as these voices fitted no people he had expected to find on the harshness of the little world. Suspicion grew in his mind suddenly.

"You never came from this planet, Porreos!"

This time, the wailing chant began before the prince could answer. It was a thing of beauty and tradition, but the ache in it was like the ache of a man who would reach for the stars to melt them against the palm of his hand, and then look to find them gone. There was a laughter to it like the laughter that there would be because of the aching he felt too strong inside his breast for anything else.

Shawn learned more from the song behind the words than from the answer that Porreos made. No, they had never developed on Mars, but far away. They had been an old race ten million years before. But on their world there had been another race, stronger, younger, with all that they lacked. And for a time, the two had touched falteringly, to the benefit of both. But then had come a great change over the younger race.

Something that the old ones could not understand had taken over the whole emotions of the new ones. It had built a sudden hatred.

The race that had sometimes feared and sometimes loved the race of Porreos was deliberately filled with superstition and belief that all other creatures were things of ultimate evil, to be shunned, hated and mistreated. And the old race had been unable to withstand it. They had never been strong. They had dwelt on only a part of the home planet at any time. But now, finally, they were forced to flee.

Mars was the best they could find.

They had carved dwellings out under the surface and trapped what little air and water there was. It was a poor home to them, but all they had.

And now they were dying, slowly and gently. They each lived for a long time, but they bred infrequently to make up for it. And there was no longer the heart in them to keep up their numbers. All of the race that was left were here, behind the curtain.

"All," Porreos repeated as the song came to its end like the sound of the last leaf falling in the forest of winter. "It is a respect we owe you, at least, for disturbing you."

"But you'll disturb children,

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Porreos? You don't mind stealing them and bring them here?"

"Don't condemn us without understanding," the voice said, and there was dignity and hurt in it. "We're a lonely people. We need others, and even a single child whom we can adopt and make into one of us helps. And besides, there's another need which doesn't concern you."

And there, Shawn realized, must lie the real crux of the matter. There was some need. There had to be, to send the shells across space looking for someone from Earth. "Maybe it does," he decided slowly. "You've brought me here. The reason should concern me as much as it would concern a child."

"No!"

SHAWN waited patiently, as an adult might put pressure on a balky child. He heard the same pressure mount behind the screen, with a rising tempo of rustlings and subdued whispers in the tantalizingly familiar alien tongue.

"Don't ask us that, Danny!" It was almost a roar of pain from the prince. "A child we can adopt and make one of us and be bound to. But it is not for you to ask! We're an old, proud people, and our traditions are stronger than the laws of nature you Earthlings fight. We cannot ask favors outside our own. We cannot beg — not even for a part of the world that was our own. And we shall not beg of you!"

It was a nightmare experience. Logic was in abeyance, as if some part of him had already recognized that normal logic could not be used. But it was no more a nightmare than his own culture had become to him in the last few years. Beside that ugliness, this unreason was almost childishly simple.

"You're not begging," he told the group behind the curtain. "I'm giving. Tell me what you want of me and take it."

There was a shock of silence, and a whisper that was not in the voice of the prince. "You trust us that much?"

To his own surprise, he did. Somewhere his mind was making a pattern out of all this, and he was not afraid of them.

"As a free gift, then," Porreos said at last, and some of the fatigue seemed to lift from the voice. "We have one who is dying. And there is something in your blood which can save her — a resistance that our bodies lack. We need a few drops of your blood, Danny."

Shawn got up quietly from the couch and approached the curtain. He thrust out his bared arm experimentally, surprised

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when it penetrated with almost no resistance. He grinned at himself as he waited.

There was the tiniest of prickings on his finger, and a brief itch. When he withdrew his hand, something like a fine mesh of cobweb lay over the end of the finger. He was sure there would be no infection.

There were stirrings but no voices behind the screen, and he waited, staring again around the limited section of the room he could see. It was beautiful. There was a shaping of beauty no man could have rendered. But there wss a weakness, a lack of the very brutal force he sensed in even the ugliness that was overtaking Earth . . . And there was no lilt here either.

"DANNY," Porreos called at last. "Danny, there is life among us in one who was dying. Your blood is our debt. Before we return you to Earth, there is another tradition which we must keep. Make one request of us, as is your right now. And if we can fulfill it, the boon is yours."

It was what Shawn had expected. It could be no other. And there was still a surprise.

No, he thought, there could be no lilt here and none among his people. The dark force there and the fair lack of force here were neither complete. And the lilt he had named and sought could only come from a true completion. No wonder the shell had come to him in answer to his yearning. No wonder that these people sought a child of Earth while his people lost their superstitious xenophobia and even wanted alien contact from the stars.

"Porreos," he asked, "can you follow my thoughts?"

"A little, Danny Shawn." The voice was reluctant, as if the admission carried unknown dangers. Then it was suddenly filled with intensity. "Yes, oh yes, we can follow!"

The curtain vanished, leaving the room visible to Shawn, and he could see all of the ancient race that was left before him. There were less than a hundred there, green-clad and brown-garbed men, and women with delicate winglike mantles of hair. Their faces were inhuman and their tiny bodies were strange. But they were familiar as no alien being could ever be.

"Ask your boon," the prince of the fairy folk cried. But they already knew, and there was laughter rising and smiles spreading across the elfin faces that looked up toward the human.

"Come home," Shawn asked them. "Come back to Earth. We need you!"

— LESTER DEL REY

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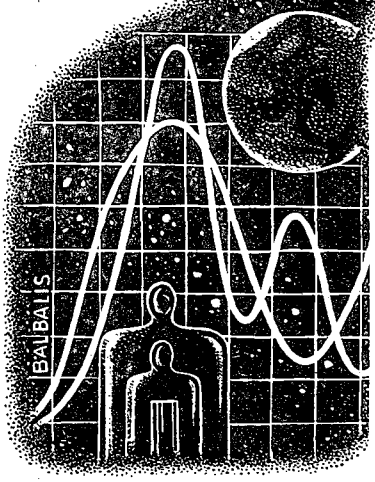

BY WILLY LEY

THE MAN I DIDN'T MEET

I DON'T know whether the *Reader's Digest* is still running the series of articles called "The Most Fascinating Man I Ever Met;" at any event, some time ago I was asked by somebody whether I had ever contributed to that series. My answer was "no" — which inevitably led to the question: "well, who *is* the most fascinating man you met?"

I have about half a dozen candidates in mind, but I can't an-

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swer this question. Partly because I would have trouble making up my mind which one of this half dozen people deserves the crown; partly because most of them are still alive and I don't know how they will develop. More important, to me at least, *I* am still alive — which means that I'll probably meet a few more fascinating people.

Since I cannot write about the most fascinating man I met I'll write, instead, about a (presumably) fascinating man I *almost* met. I was in High School then. I must have been about 17 years old. My teacher of French, Dr. Sepp Schneider, was a ski enthusiast . . . which has some bearing on the story. He had helped to make a feature-length movie about skiing and needed some help in distributing literature to the audience of a first private screening. I was drafted. To enhance my enthusiasm for this job he told me that he had invited Dr. Theodor Zell to be in the audience and that he would introduce me to Dr. Zell after the screening.

That was enough for me. I had been reading Dr. Zell's books for some six years and had bought all of them that were still in print. (Fortunately for my pocketbook most of them were what we now call paperbacks.)

Dr. Schneider had known Dr. Zell for many years. He told me what was then still a secret, namely that the well known name, "Dr. Theodor Zell," was a pen name. His real name was Dr. Leopold Bauke.

Germans are, as a rule, bitterly opposed to name changes since this implies a wilful break with family traditions. Dr. Bauke had made an exception. It so happens that his real name is the idiomatic German word (somewhat mispronounced, which produces a humorous effect) for the bass drum of an Infantry band. Such a name would not do on the cover of a zoological book. Therefore Bauke had changed it (for literary purposes only) to Zell. This corresponded, or at least hinted at, the zoological content, since the German word *Zelle* means "cell" in the biological sense. It does mean a cell in jail, too; but it was most unlikely that anybody would take that meaning for a pseudonym.

Well, Dr. Zell did not come to the movie preview. His friend Dr. Schneider promised me that he would make another appointment. It was scheduled several months later and then cancelled. Schneider remarked, "Theodor seems to be quite sick." He was. Half a year later I read about his death.

So I never actually did meet Dr. Zell.

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WHO was he?

The external circumstances of his life can be told in one paragraph, and even that paragraph is just for completeness' sake. He was born in 1862 on an estate some three score miles from Berlin. He studied law, presumably at his father's request, and finally received the title *Doktor beider Rechte,* or "doctor of both laws" — meaning Roman and *Code Napoléon.* Then he settled in Berlin and started writing about animals.

Within five years he was famous. Of course, a few people attacked his views; but ten times as many defended them. Only a very few people knew him personally, though some of his books sold more than 100,000 copies. In 1924 he quietly died. His obituary did not even mention the cause of death.

There exists a joke about a man who, for the first time in his life, attends a theatrical performance, which happens to be *Hamlet.* On his way out he is heard to mutter: "All that fellow Shakespeare did was string a lot of quotations together." Something similar may be said about Dr. Zell's work. Many of the ideas are now simply taken for granted that even people old enough to know about Dr. Zell do not know that it was he who said so first. And the younger generation of zoologists doesn't even know his name.

In writing about Dr. Zell it is therefore not very important who he was. What counts is what he said. His specialty was to explain actions of animals which seem mysterious or senseless to the casual observer. Interestingly enough, he never ran an animal experiment in the modern sense. He only observed.

Some of his work dealt with stories current in his time. One of them, which I heard myself as a boy from a forester, dealt with the mixed offspring of wolves and domesticated dogs. That they do interbreed is a fact well known to every outdoorsman in the areas where wolves occur. The story was that puppies resulting from such a mixed marriage could be domesticated, but that pure wolf puppies could not. But if you found puppies in the forest, how could you tell whether they were dog, mixed or wolf?

Very simple, said the people of what is now Poland and the western fringe of Soviet Russia. You pen them up for a few hours. Then, when they are likely to be thirsty, you give them water. If they lap it up with their tongues like domestic dogs they are dogs or mixed and can be kept. But if they drink like sheep, they are wolves and must be killed.

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Nobody ever doubted that story; everybody had learned it early in life from his father. Except Dr. Zell. He had grown up with lots of dogs and had seen wolves. There was no difference in the build of the mouth; why should there be one in drinking habits? "It took one trip to the zoo," he wrote, "but then it took five hours of patience." After that time all three species of wolves had performed for him, all of them lapping the water like his own dogs.

Another problem was the one of how carrion-eating birds find their food. The customary answer was that these birds have a fantastically keen sense of smell, so keen that they not only smell a dead body miles away but that they can even smell it if a person or an animal is going to die soon. We now know that this is nonsense. Birds (with the possible exception of the New Zealand kiwi) don't have any sense of smell at all. True, the bill of most birds still shows holes where nostrils normally belong, but there is nothing behind it to do the actual smelling.

About sixty years ago a naturalist began to grow doubtful. He expressed his thoughts in the following manner: "The eye operates by means of light rays; the nose needs particles of the smelling substance to work on. A bird circling, say, five hundred yards up is likely to be above the limit to which such particles will ascend. Moreover, it is moving so fast that its nose would be handicapped by its very speed. Therefore I believe that, in the case of birds, the sense of smell plays a very minor rôle in the process of locating food."

Dr. Zell went one step farther. With numerous examples he showed that in the case of birds the sense of smell plays no rôle at all. (This was before the anatomical impossibility of a bird smelling anything had been demonstrated.) When he declared categorically, "Birds go by sight only," he had already postulated his main theory, namely the distinction of animals into "eye-guided" and "nose-guided".

Just to avoid misunderstandings I have to point out that Dr. Zell (though he mentioned insects occasionally) was essentially concerned with mammals and birds. Since it turned out that all birds are exclusively "eye-guided," the discussion of animal behavior dealt with mammals, especially with domesticated animals and game.

He related at one time that the casual question of why some dogs bay at the moon started him thinking. Another thing that stuck in his mind was the rather unflattering German saying, "So-

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and-so behaved just as stupid as a cow confronted with a new door to the stable." The third example that provided a clue to him was a story told by a lady who owned an English bulldog. While the maid was taking the dog for a stroll, a new and very large mirror was installed in the lady's boudoir. As the dog was brought in and saw his reflection in the big mirror he started to growl and evidently got ready for battle, approaching his reflection stiff-legged, cautious and teeth ready, until he was about a yard from the mirror. Then he sniffed a few times and quietly settled down in his favorite corner on the carpet.

The lady concluded that her pet quieted down as soon as he recognized himself in the mirror.

That, Dr. Zell said, was not the reason — even though he did not doubt the facts as related. Dogs are the commonest example of a nose-guided animal. If dogs could talk (this is my statement, not Dr. Zell's), they would not say, "Let me see," they would say, "Let me smell." To a dog things do not "look right," they "smell right." And just as we may look very carefully at something which is by no means a pretty sight, so a dog may carefully sniff something which doesn't smell nice at all. He needs a "smell identification" to make sense out of something (or just to remember it) while we need a "picture identification" for the same reasons.

Keeping in mind that the dog is "nose-guided," the story of the bulldog and the large mirror appears in a different light. On entering the boudoir the dog saw another dog and prepared himself for a fight, just in case. As he came closer, the "other dog" came closer too. But when they were within jumping distance the bulldog could not smell the "other dog." Hence there *was* no other dog — and he might as well take a nap.

The cow that stands, seemingly the epitome of stupidity, in front of the new stable door is in a similar dilemma. Cows are "nose-guided" too. Now, all the way home all the smells are as they should be and where they should be. But just before entering the stable one expected smell (that of the old door) is missing and a new one, not at all resembling the old one (namely freshly cut wood and paint), is in its place. To a nose-guided animal this can only mean that there is something fundamentally wrong. To an eye-guided animal the difference would be minor; the door would have the right size and shape and approximately the same color as the old one.

Oh, yes, the baying at the moon.

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Well, there is something up there which can be seen. It isn't there all the time, in which case one would probably learn to ignore it. But even when there it has no smell at all, which is dismaying.

As Dr. Zell phrased it: "Just try to imagine how we would feel if there was something in our room which we could smell and even feel, but could not see. It would be a rather upsetting experience!"

Since the nose is so important to the dog, their habit of leaving a "visiting card" at trees and fireplugs becomes clear too. They smell not just that another dog has been there, but *which* other dog. If you watch your own dog's behavior carefully you can almost guess it too, because one other dog is considered a friend, while another dog is the opposite. The point here is again that you have to see how your own dog behaves; your dog goes by his nose. Dr. Zell coined the term "the nose-guided animal's post office" for these landmarks where a "notice" (in the form of a smell) is left.

The American writer Ernest Thompson-Seton had arrived at the same conclusion, incidentally. He wrote that when the wolf Lobo stuck his nose into the air and sniffed for ten minutes it was to him as if you spend ten minutes with the morning newspaper. You learn what has been going on in your absence, or while you were asleep.

Naturally Dr. Zell's distinction into nose-guided and eye-guided was not supposed to mean that the animal in question goes by this one sense only. Except the birds; it is quite possible that the old naturalist guessed right when he pointed to the high speed of movement as the cause. We are ourselves eye-guided animals. But we sniff for a gas leak (this partly due to the fact that we *know* that gas cannot be seen), and when a piece of meat which has been overlooked in the refrigerator for some time does not "look right" we make our nose a consultant. Likewise dogs do see, though apparently poorly (with the exception of some breeds like the greyhound), but to them sight is secondary. We trust our eyes. The dog trusts his nose. In passing it may be remarked that this explains why an old blind dog does not seem to be particularly unhappy. He is in about the position of a man who has lost his sense of smell; it's distressing on occasion, but no major catastrophe.

Mostly because some critics misconstrued "nose-guided" into "exclusively nose-guided" and other critics brought up the question "what about hearing?" Dr. Zell later phrased his guiding idea

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differently by saying that "among higher mammals the sum of the three major senses (sight, smell and hearing) is a constant." It seems to me that the nose-guided animals place a little more reliance on their hearing than do the eye-guided animals.

Well, that's the story of the man I didn't meet. Possibly he wouldn't have been too interesting as a person. But his ideas were — and these we can still talk about.

ANY QUESTIONS?

I have two questions. (1) *Is it true that a ship which sinks where the ocean is very deep will never reach the bottom?* (2) *Some time ago I called a young porcupine a hedgehog. My neighbor laughed at me and said they were two different animals. Is this true?*

David E. Brown
Cleveland Heights, Ohio

"No" to the first, "yes" to the second.

The idea that a sinking ship may not reach bottom in deep water is rather widely distributed, but there is no truth in it. Since water is a virtually incompressible liquid — as most liquids are — the density of the water at the bottom of the ocean is only very slightly greater than that of surface water. Hence a piece of sheet steel, such as a no longer watertight ship, will sink all the way to the bottom no matter how deep the water. Of course, it is just possible that a damaged ship has a number of compartments which still hold air; such a ship may, for a while, behave like a submerged submarine, drifting a few dozen feet below the surface. Whether such a case has actually been observed is somethng I don't know. But in time the air will escape from these compartments too, and then the ship will sink.

As regards the porcupine and the hedgehog, they *are* two entirely different animals which have only two things in common: both are mammals and both are spiny. But the porcupine is a rodent, like rabbits, squirrels, rats, etc., while the hedgehog, which is somewhat smaller than a porcupine, belongs to the much older Insectivores (like moles and shrews). There are no hedgehogs in the United States except in zoological gardens.

I am asking this question of you because you are the author of Dragons in Amber. I have a beautiful piece of amber jewelry and while showing it to a friend of mine remarked that the "stone" is between 45 and 50 million years old. She admired the piece but remarked that, after all, every stone is millions of years old. I presume this is true, or is it?

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Remember that we were speaking of jewelry, that is, of stones like a diamond, a ruby, an opal or a topaz, not just a piece of rock.

(Mrs.) Rutka Perkainen
Englewood, New Jersey

Well, we could include odd "pieces of rock" in the discussion, too. In fact, it may be helpful if we do so. A piece of chalk, having been formed during the Cretaceous Period, is obviously older than a piece of amber which was formed during the very early part of the Tertiary Period. And a piece of anthracite coal is older, too, having been formed during the Carboniferous Period, or roughly 300 million years ago. And some plain rock samples from Canada could be 800 million years old.

As regards the age of an opal or a topaz, the answer is unfortunately that we do not know. Most gem stones are chemically rather simple substances. Ruby and sapphire, for example, are aluminum oxides, opal and amethyst are silicon oxides and so forth. What counts is that they are crystallized, and have just the proper kind (and amount) of impurities for color, etc. We don't know how long the process of formation takes in nature but, under the proper conditions, it might be less than the time a woman would be willing to wait for an especially beautiful stone. Since the process of formation must be rather short there is no way of judging how long ago it took place. A fine amethyst might have been formed five million years ago or only five thousand years ago. To determine the age of a particular gem is, at least at present, impossible.

The diamond is a special case — mainly because, chemically speaking, it is the simplest of all gems, merely crystallized carbon. The first man to crystallize carbon in the laboratory was the French chemist Henri Moissan, a little over sixty years ago. Moissan suspected that carbon might not crystallize under ordinary pressures and thought of a way to produce high pressure suddenly. He dissolved carbon in liquid iron and then dumped the whole into cold water. The sudden contraction of the molten iron produced the high pressures he wanted, and he did find minute diamonds in the iron afterwards. Evidently they had formed instantaneously.

(General Electric is making diamonds, at present structurally poor and blackish in color, up to one carat in size, employing temperatures from 2200 to 4400 degrees Fahrenheit and pressures between 800,000 and 1,800,000 pounds per square inch. But they don't say how long it takes — for obvious reasons.)

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If great heat and sudden high pressure is what makes a diamond it was suggested almost immediately after Moissan's success that diamonds might be created by the impact of large meteorites. This suggestion has been revived recently. If this is correct the diamond would be formed in a fraction of a second. If a process similar to Moissan's laboratory experiment is responsible for the origin of crystallized carbon the same would be true. In a display of various gem stones it is quite possible, therefore, that the big diamond which is the center of the display has the least chronological age — if the most value — of all of them.

After you and L. Sprague de Camp have traced the wanderings of Odysseus in your book Lands Beyond I am wondering whether a similar job could not be done for the deeds of Hercules, or Herakles?

Sandra Rosén
The Bronx, N. Y.

In general the answer is "no". In the *Odyssey* the technique of the poet — later imitated by whoever composed the tales of Sindbad the Sailor — is to lead the listener gradually from the known into the unknown. The audience at such a recital was, of course, rather mixed. Many were people who had never left their village. Others would have more knowledge because of association and education. And some might be sailors who had been in distant places. These must not be given a chance to get up and say: "Nonsense! After you round that isle the black headland is in the direction of sunset, not in the direction of noon." For this reason the geographical facts in the *Odyssey* are as accurate as they could be made — which in turn makes it possible to trace just what the poet had in mind.

The tales around Herakles lack this desire for accuracy. True, the country ruled by Geryon is most likely what we now call Spain, but that is as far as it goes.

However, for one of the deeds of Herakles one scholar has made an interesting suggestion. It is the killing of the Hydra. The Hydra, as you'll recall, is the nine-headed serpent-like monster which devastated the countryside. Of its nine heads, one was immortal. When Herakles went to work on the monster, lopping off its heads, it grew two new ones for every one it lost. Finally a flaming torch was applied to the necks after a head had been chopped off and they would not grow again. But the immortal head could not be

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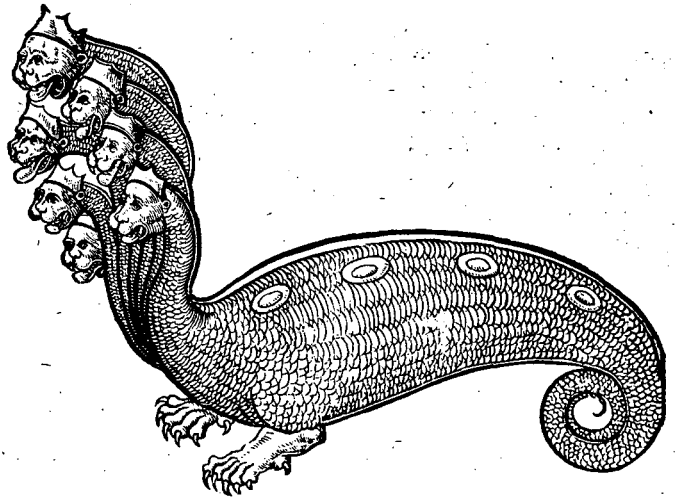

killed, so Herakles buried it under a huge rock.

Just for your amusement I add here an artist's attempt to picture the Hydra, it is from Konrad Gesner's *Historia Animalium,* (1655.)

Now the "explanation."

The name Hydra bears a most suspicious resemblance to the Greek word for "water," namely *hydor,* and the Hydra therefore was probably something liquid. And if you try to block a rivulet or creek it will probably flow around the obstacle in two rivulets, "growing two heads for the one lopped off."

But a wellspring of any kind would improve the landscape, not devastate it. Yes, said the scholar. If *hydor* meant "water" only, it certainly would. But in ancient times *hydor* probably was used for any liquid, and an oil well would devastate the purely rustic landscape. Hence the *hydor* stops flowing when a torch is applied to it. The immortal head is, of course, the oil well itself . . . but a huge rock might block it.

It would be nice if we knew just what geographic locality is meant. We could then judge whether oil is likely there.

I am the first to admit that this is a very ingenious explanation. Whether it is also correct is an entirely different question.

$1/2/3/4 \ldots . = 100.$

THE problem published in the February issue was, as you probably remember, to use the

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figures from 1 to 9 in their natural order but, by interspersing plus and minus or other mathematical signs between the figures, to produce an equation balanced by the figure 100. I got the idea from the West German magazine *Kosmos* which posed the same question, but did not require the figures natural sequence.

To begin with the *Kosmos* published a number of solutions, of which seven complied with my stricter rule. They were:

(1X2X3X4) + 5 + 6 + (7X8) + 9 = 100	(K.1)
(1X2X3) + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 + (8X9) = 100	(K.2)
123 + 4—5 + 67—89 = 100	(K.3)
12 + 3 + 4—(56:7) + 89 = 100	(K.4)
1X2X3—(4X5) + (6X7) + (8X9) = 100	(K.5)
1 + (2X3) + (4X5)—6 + 7 + (8X9) = 100	(K.6)
1 + [(2X3X4X5):6] + 7 + (8X9) = 100	(K.7)

most of which were also found by *Galaxy* readers. One amusing (and otherwise flattering) letter from Sally Markowitz in Brooklyn provided the following:

1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 + (8X9) = 100

with the statement that it couldn't be correct because it was so easy.

But the ones who really went to town were the team of Robert Salzman, John Bailey and Donald Maclachlan, all of Raytheon Company in Andover, Mass. These patient mathematicians found 16 solutions using only the basic operations, addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. They added five more using square roots (of course only the roots of 4 and 9 are actually useful in this short sequence of numbers) and, as if this were not enough, they found two equations using factorials and four more using factorials and the square root of nine.

In their first sixteen they duplicated K.7. The others are:

12—3 + (4X5) + 6 + (7X8) + 9 =	100
—1—(2X3X4) + 56 + 78—9 =	100
(1X2)—3 + 4 + (56:7) + 89 =	100
1 + 2—(3X4)—5 + (6X7) + (8X9) =	100
—1 + [(2:3)45] + 6 + (7X8) + 9 =	100
—1 + (23X4) + 56—(7X8) + 9 =	100
1 + (2X3) + (4X5)—6 + 7 + (8X9) =	100
(—1 + 2)(3 + 4)(5 + 6):7 + 89 =	100
(—1 + 2)(3 + 4 + 5 + 6—7) + 89 =	100
1 + 2 + 34—5 + 67—8 + 9 =	100
—1 + 2 + 3 + (4X5X6X7:8)—9 =	100
(—1 + 2)34 + 56—7 + 8 + 9 =	100
(1X2) + 3 + 45 + 67—8—9 =	100
(—1 + 2)3 + 4(—56 + 78) + 9 =	100

These are the simple equation. Actually the others really are no more complicated but some readers may not know what a factorial is. Well, a factorial is the figure you get when you multiply all integers up to the number. Factorial five (written 5!) is 1 X 2 X 3 X 4 X 5 = 120. Here are the two solutions:

1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5!—6—7—8—9 = 100
1 + 2 + (3X4!)—5 + 6 + 7 + 8 + 9 = 100

And finally the five involving square roots:

—1 + (2X3X4X5:6) + 78 + √9 =	100
12 + 34 + 56—7 + 8—√9 =	100
1—2 + (3X4) + (5X6) + (7X8) + √9 =	100
1 + 2 + (3X4X5) + (6X7)—8 + √9 =	100
—1 + 23 + √4—5—6 + 78 + 9 =	100

I feel sure that there are still more solutions. But for the moment we have enough.

— WILLY LEY

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He couldn't defeat the dragon, he was certain of that. Nor — even more surely — could he face losing!

By JUDITH MERRIL

Illustrated by EMSH

THE DEEP DOWN DRAGON

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THE GIRL'S one duty was to look — and understand:

White flatness of the wide wall dissolved into mist as the room dimmed. Then whiteness itself broke apart, from all-color to each component.

Pinpoints of brightness swirled and coalesced into new patterns of color and shape. Pinks and yellows here. Silver, blue, black there. Brown, gray, green. Rainbow stripes.

First flat, like a painted scene, then deepening to its own kind of reality, the scene glowed in the center of nothingness where the wall had been before.

The scene had been exactly the same before, she remembered. There was the strangely clear-air atmosphere, thin and sharp. The sketched-in effect of the background — hills, oddly shaped? A domed structure closer? — was simply a matter of her focused attention, not distance haze. Through this transparent air detailed vision would be possible at a far distance. And the background hills were far; for the moment, however, they were only background.

What counted was front-center, bright-colored . . . as real as when she had seen it the first time, for herself.

The three footprints. The shoe. The square of cloth. The three bushes. In color, focus and meaning they were identical. Her own shoe, with the silly spike heel and lacy strap unfastened, was lying where it dropped on the pink-hued sand, alongside the alien prints. The first time she had not known why, exactly, the prints were "alien." Now she saw it was the shoe that accomplished the effect. Plenty of three-toed things left prints in sand, but nothing exactly the length of her own foot was tripartite.

Nothing on Earth.

It was the same thing with the brown-gray-green thorn bushes . . . planted, she suddenly realized, by some insane gardener, to landscape that circular blockhouse thing in the background! Or maybe not so insane. Nowhere else in sight was there a growing or green thing at all. Poor green was better than none. Spikes, spines and thorns did grow. They were alive, if still — alien? Why? Of course, the same thing. The patterned robe. A square of cloth, from the same bolt from which she had made the robe, only last week, hung impaled on the farthest bush.

Farthest? Nearest! Nearest to the door of the house, from which the strange footprints curved down and off-scene.

Half the wall was filled now.

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Inch by slow fraction of inch the scene widened. She sat forward, breathing almost not at all, tensed with knowing the next print, or the one beyond it, would contain the print-maker, the — alien.

Alien? What an odd thought! That was the second — the third? — time she'd thought it. She did not remember the thought from the first seeing of the same scene. "Strange," maybe. "Unknown." Not "alien."

Odd . . . Odder still, as her eyes went unwillingly from the forming print at the far edge of the scene, she saw her own sandal alongside the trail, silly spike heel and lacy strap, still fastened as it had been on her foot . . .

That wasn't just odd. It was wrong! And the torn strip of fabric ripped from her robe by the thornbush —

"That's not how it was! That's not the way it went," she thought, and the scene faded out.

The light brightened in the room as the wall came back to normality, and she realized that she had not just thought it, but spoken aloud.

"THIS IS *his,* remember?" Gordon was smiling. "Only the very first frame is identical. It starts branching off right away. The colors, for instance?"

Ruth thought back and of course he was right. *Hers* had been much yellower. Pink sand was absurd.

She laughed out loud, at the absurdity of thinking anything in the projection absurd. Then she explained. "Pink sand. I was thinking how silly that was, and then I remembered that *mine* had little pink clouds floating over my pure yellow desert! Why on Earth do you think he'd have pink sand, though?"

Gordon smiled again as she realized how her own question had answered itself. ". . . on Earth . . ." she had said. Of course. Why should it be Earth at all?

With the questioning thought came concern. Why had *hers* been on Earth? Did that mean . . .? Were they showing her Charles's sequence just to explain, in the kindest way, why she failed?

She wouldn't finish the thoughts, even in her own head. But Gordon was chuckling quietly as he watched her. Of course he knew what had been crossing her — face, she decided, as well as her mind! Other people had been through this whole thing before. Half of them must have gone through the same thoughts.

Half of them would have been worried . . . and how many

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of them had good cause to be?

"Relax, Ruth," he said warmly. "You haven't failed or passed yet. There's a lot more to it than the sequence. But I can tell you that it makes no difference where you make the setting, or when. At least —" he frowned faintly, and she knew it was impatience with his own imprecision in a vital communication. "At least, it makes no more difference — and no less — than your choice of colors or textures. A good bit less difference than clothing, for instance."

She looked at him gratefully.

"All right," she said. "I'll try to forget my own sequence."

"The best way is just to let yourself go, as completely as you can. There's no harm in being aware of the difference, just so you aren't contrasting. It won't rationalize. But you don't have to stop being you to be *him* for a while, you know." He smiled again.

She nodded and grinned. Some things did not have to be verbalized.

She shivered and settled back, ready to watch — to feel, to know, be, exist — in *his* mind and body.

Gordon didn't say any more. The room dimmed again, and once more the misting wall focused the scene.

When it had covered the wall, Ruth had forgotten that there was a wall there at all. Or that she was herself.

More completely than ever before, or again (unless and until they fused to a new person, their child) she was one with the man who had made her his own.

THE trail of prints led tantalizingly out of sight, curving away behind a low ridge of dunes. Unless the creature, whatever it was, moved much more swiftly than the prints promised, it had been more than a few minutes since it happened.

He looked again at her slipper dropped on its side in the sand. The first glimpse had been more incongruous than anything else. The alienness of the prints contrasted ridiculously with the spiced femininity of Ruth's shoe on the orange-pink sand. Now it seemed to him that the slipper was not dropped but thrown. Or kicked.

Kicked off her foot? For the first time, fear grabbed him, a clawed fist of ice in his belly that turned him to look again at the bright rainbow of stuff draped and torn on the edge of the bush near the door. It was part of the skirt of the new robe, the one she made herself last week, after he noticed the new fabric in the shop window.

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He had liked it; so she had bought it and fashioned into a garment to please him. Now it hung cruelly torn by spiked thorns. And she —

He tore himself loose from the immobility of anxiety, and ran for the house. Somewhere in back of his mind the question was registered: What shop? Where? The nearest shop was forty million miles away. The question was registered, filed, and ticketed for later thought.

Right now he could not even stop to wonder why he had not noticed the door before. He had to have seen it, when he saw the bush. How do you not notice that the thick door of a pressure hut has been torn loose from its hinges? What kind of wild man speculates about his wife's robe when his home, in which he left her safe and protected, no more than five hours ago, has been violated?

That was a dangerous word. He unthought it, and the red haze cleared away. He could see again.

"Ruth!" he shouted. "*Ruth*!"

No answer. He had known there could not be one. "Ruth!" he kept shouting to thin-aired emptiness inside the dome that had been — five short hours ago — rich with Earth air and scents, sounds and solidity: Ruth.

His gun hung by the door. It had been a joke, he remembered. Pioneers ought to keep a gun by the front door. Damn right they should! He grabbed it as he ran, stride unbroken. He tore off down the trail of the monstrous prints, past the bushes and the sandal, fifty feet more. His lungs were on fire inside him. He would have cursed in his futility, but there was no strength or breath for self-anger; not even, just now, for anger better placed. It was not even possible now to run back to the copter. He had wasted too much strength. He had to drag himself full length along the sand, catching and holding the thin concentration of lichen's oxygen at the sand surface.

Inside the copter, lungs full again, he was coasting along fifteen feet above the prints of horned three-toed feet. He had time enough, and more than he wanted, to think and to question his idiocies. As if he had forgotten where he was. At the first hint of danger they faced he went into shock. As if he were back on Earth, wrapped in her warm air, strong-armed gravity.

Ancestral memories reacting for him in moment of panic? He sneered back at himself for that kind of excuse. The only part that applied was the single word, "panic."

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He'd panicked. Okay. Don't forget it, boy. But don't let it slow you down, either. File for future reference. Take it out and examine it — later. Meantime, what counts is down there. Right now, you're just a pair of eyes. Later you may get to be arms and legs, a back, if you're lucky a gun. Right now — just eyes. And a computer.

He studied the prints. Two-footed or four? He couldn't decide — and then he saw the pattern, and it was not two or four, but three. Three? Distribute *N* pounds of weight — divided at any time on two of three feet, in prints that each dug in deeper than his own foot would, with his full weight on it. The damn thing was big. *N* pounds was too many.

That didn't make sense. What kind of Thing made prints like that on Mars? On a planet whose largest life-form was adapted to breathing air no more than two feet above ground? And even those didn't cross desert dryness. They lived in the still thinly moist and green valley of old sea bottoms.

The error was obvious. What kind of creature could make a print like a man's, on Mars? Largest *native* life-form, he had meant. So this Thing, with three-toed, three-legged stride, hard-bottomed foot digging too deep in dry sand, had a stride barely more than a man's, one meter maybe from print to print along the trail. It was not long enough to be that heavy. Not man, not Martian. Something else.

Alien.

He tried to think more, but either there were no more clues or the block was too great. Alien, from where? No way to know. What for? Where to? Why? When?

For the moment, the "when" was what counted the most. Whatever and whyever, It had Ruth with It. Was she still alive? Did she have an oxytank?

He tried to remember, aside from the door, what signs of violence, struggle or damage he'd seen in the house. He remembered none. The door, the robe and the slipper. That was all.

TEN minutes after the copter lifted, he came to the first rock outcroppings. For a while after that he could still follow the trail without too much trouble. The creature tended to stay on the sand-drifted crevices between hills. There were still plenty of prints clear enough to be seen from the height he had to maintain to stay clear of the jagged-edged, sand-scoured shapes of bare hilltops. But as the ground level rose, there was less and less sand between rocks to

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catch imprints, and it was more difficult to peer down and navigate at the same time.

Hard to say if he would be better off on the ground. He could spend hours trying wrong passages, backing and trying again, to search out the scattered prints that made the only trail now. Circling above, he could save time — maybe. Certainly, if he could stay in the air, he kept an advantage he'd never have face to face. (Face to chest? belly? thigh? No way at all to judge relative height.) Not to mention armament, general equipment. Inside the copter, he had the distilled and neatly packaged essence of Earth technology to fight for him. On foot in the hills, with whatever he could carry on his own back —?

It was obvious he had no choice. He had just noticed the time. Twilight would fall fast and dark across him in a half hour or less. Moonless, or as good as moonless, dark would follow short minutes after. The kind of cross-eyed trail-following and peak-hopping he could barely manage in sunlight would then be impossible. Find a place where he could land, then. Now, quickly, while he still could.

The copter dropped, and he found a ledge just firm and wide enough. Charles went methodically through lockers, picking and choosing, till at last he had a pile he thought he could manage, with all the essentials, in one form or other.

Searchlight, rope, hand pickaxe, knife. Pistol-grip torch, which he thought of as a flame thrower. Plain old pistol. Extra airtank. Extra mask. Light warm blanket. Bullets, and gas for the torch. Food concentrates. Two water flasks. He climbed into his heat suit, discarded the blanket, and took her suit instead. He had thought to make a knapsack of the blanket, carrying the rest of the stuff on his back, but that was silly. He had to be able to get at whatever he needed, but fast. He got out a package of clip-back hooks and studded his suit with them, hanging himself like a grim Christmas tree inside-out: bright flame-red suit underneath; dull gray, brown and black tanks, handles, tools and weapons dangling all around.

He practiced bending over, sitting, squatting, reaching. He could climb. Okay. The weight was going to be hard to handle, but not impossible.

He added one more airtank, and one more flask. If it all got too heavy, he could leave a trail of his own behind him. At least the stuff would be nearer than here in the copter. He was half out of the hatch when he re-

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membered it: The first aid kit.

He started into the hills with his searchlight flooding the pass at his feet just as darkness collapsed from the sky. He wondered as he stumbled forward and up — following an edge of toe here, of heel there — what else he had not thought to take.

THEN the glare of light glinted off redness on rockside. A smear, that's all. Red blood. Not alien. Ruth's!

His gloved hand reached out, and the red smudged. Still wet? Impossible. In this atmosphere, the seconds they'd need to get out of sight would have dried blood. He looked closely at his gauntlet and moved forward more swiftly, with an exultation of knowledge and purpose he had not dared let himself hold until then. It was not blood. It was spilled red powder. Rouge! She was alive, able to think, to act! She knew he would have to come after, and she was helping by leaving a trail.

He no longer followed footprints. He followed the crimson trail blazes. And wondered how far back they'd started, how much time he might have gained had he abandoned the copter sooner.

No use wondering. No use thinking back. Now it was only the next moment and the next. Was he gaining or losing? This he had to know. He was traveling at his best speed. He went faster. If he lost ground now, he had no chance. The creature was making a path as straight as the hard rockside hills would permit; It knew where It was headed. The Thing could not climb, that was clear, so It would not have gone through the hills without cause. But wherever It was headed, presumably that spot offered It some protection. He had to find It and head It off first.

He found he could go faster still. And then, suddenly, he knew he'd better slow down. It was nothing he'd seen — surely nothing he'd heard. Inside the suit hood, even such sounds as carried through the thin air were stilled. Well, then.

He opened the mask, and he did hear. Maybe it was some vibration of the Thing's tread through the rock that had warned him first. Well, he would not give himself away by the same carelessness. He knew he was very close to It now.

He moved so carefully after that, it seemed agonizingly as if he were once more crawling belly-flat. But he knew he was gaining on them. The Thing was really slow!

He was close. Fool! he thought angrily, as he switched his light

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off. Creep up on the Thing with a searchlight to flood the scene in advance! The suit had an infrascope in the visor. He'd have had to close it soon anyhow. Five minutes was about maximum breathing without a tank; unless you cared to drag yourself flat as he'd done earlier.

The black-light scope came on. Charles paused with a new certainty under an overhang of rock at the next bend. And saw the Thing. And his wife.

HE NOTICED, in a detached and extremely calm way, that what happened next all happened in seconds. Maybe a minute at most. No more, because with the sharp self-awareness exploding inside him, he could count his breaths while he did all the rest.

He inhaled exactly three times — deeply, evenly — while it occurred.

Before the first breath, there was again the ice-fingered grip of fear twisting his gut, squeezing the strength and air out of him.

He inhaled then. And let the retinal image go to his brain, instead of his belly.

It was twice the height of a man, weirdly elongated, the tripod base all ropy tendon, thin and hard. The trunk — thorax? — chest? — well, whatever, shelled or spacesuited or something, but shiny-hard — bulked enormous, four feet around surely at the center. At least four. And the Thing's head was turned just far enough to the side so that Charles could see clearly that his wife's face was in the gaping, reptilian maw of the Thing.

It held her under one arm. Her feet kicked at its side. It seemed not to notice. Her arm, with the bright metal cosmetic case clutched in her hand, swung wide, reaching to hit the canyon wall whenever it could. Her head was half into the creature's mouth, firmly held, chin and forehead, by its enormous stretched lips.

While he drew in the first breath, he saw all this clearly and knew he dared not act in such a way as to make It bite down — from fear or anger, made no difference. Charles could not see inside the great maw. What kind of teeth, what harm had been done, what could be done, he did not know . . . and knew he could not risk. He thought through and rejected five separate plans, while his hands found the items he'd need. He drew a new breath, and his legs moved beneath him.

He could not shoot first. And he could not simply follow and learn more about the Thing. Be-

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cause another image came through from somewhere — the same eyes that watched every move of the Thing? Unlikely, but it had to be — of the gleaming column of metal too close ahead. A Thing-ship. So: no time.

He leaped, knife in hand. Pricked the creature, and jumped back.

It worked, as he'd prayed; no; as he had known, not just hoped or prayed, that it must. The Thing jumped, turned to look — and released his wife's head.

He did not waste effort in looking, but saw anyhow that her face was unharmed. He jumped again, drawing the third breath, and pricked at the arm that held her. She squirmed and pushed, exactly on time, like a part of himself — which she was — and her body was clear of his as he emptied the pistol at Its head.

He reached for the torch.

By that time he could not stop himself. He would have avoided the torch if he could. As it was he thundered at Ruth, above the explosion: "*Down!* Keep down, babe!" And the blue flame of released oxygen missed her head by a foot . . .

He carried her back to the copter with strength he had not believed he could find. Nobody pursued.

SHE SAT up, dazed, as the lights brightened slowly, and the white wall turned serenely opaque. She looked across at Gordon, and her face glowed with pleasure.

"No sillier than mine was," she said, laughing. "Was it?"

"Not at all," Gordon said.

She sat politely, waiting.

Gordon stood up, grinned down at her, and offered his hand. "I think they must be done in there," he told her, nodding in the direction of the screenwall. "I imagine you'd like . . ." He let it trail off.

"You're a smart old thing, aren't you?" She took the hand and came to her feet. Then, on impulse, astonished at herself, she stood on tiptoe and placed a quick kiss on his cheek. "What's more, you're a doll." She turned and ran, glad but embarrassed.

The door closed behind her. A mirrored door on the opposite wall opened, and a young man entered. Gordon greeted him warmly. "Well — what did you think?" His own enthusiasm was unmistakeable.

"Outside of it being a great racket? Do they all react that way?"

"Well, not all. Matter of fact, this pair is practically classical. You don't often get a mesh like this one — you saw hers, didn't you?"

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"I don't think so," the other said. "Unless it was one of the bunch you ran for us last night?"

"Could be. She worked out a sort of a junior-size Tyrannosaur. Out of Professor Challenger maybe? Future-past uncertainty, here on Earth. Had it threaten the children, and just when she was about to sacrifice herself to save them, old Charlie showed up in the nick of time to do the slaying."

The other nodded. "It's a fascinating technique," he said. "Damn glad to have this chance to see it work. One thing I don't follow — why do you show them each other's? That's pretty much against basic theory on joint therapy, isn't it?"

Gordon was smiling again. "Well," he said slowly. "This pair didn't really take the runs for therapy." He had a surprise to spring, and he was enjoying it. "You've heard about the new screening technique for colonists? You know the last expedition had only one broken couple and two psychotic collapses, out of fifty-six?"

The younger man whistled. Then he understood. "This is how you're doing it? Let them fantasy their own reactions? Well, hell. Sure! What's surprising is, nobody thought of using it before!"

"Of course not. It was right under our noses," Gordon said.

They both laughed.

"In this case," he added, "we've got everything. His sequence stressed readiness, thoughtful preparation, careful action. You saw that. Hers was strongest on instinct, physical wisdom, that whole set. He was moved to do things he couldn't possibly do — and knows he can't, by the way — in real life, because *she* was in danger. Her stimulus was a threat to home and children. And even then, she made sure *he* did the actual dragon-slaying job." He flicked a switch. Through the wall, now, they saw Ruth and Charles, standing, holding hands, smiling and squeezing a little. That was all.

The two doctors smiled as the paleskinned, ninety-five-pound, five-foot product of slum-crowded Earth threw a proud arm around his wife's narrow shoulder, and led her out.

"Doesn't look like much of a dragon-slayer," the younger one said.

"No. But as long as he *is* . . ." He paused, looked the visitor over with care, and said. "You asked about showing them to each other? Ever think how much more therapy there might be for him in knowing she *knows* he can handle a dragon? Or for her, knowing that he really *can*?"

— JUDITH MERRIL

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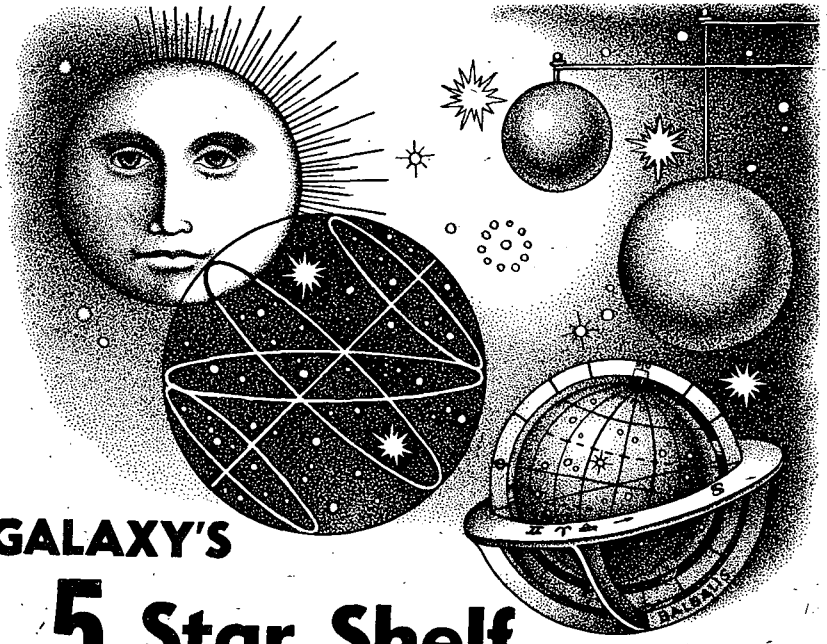

GALAXY'S 5 Star Shelf

THE HIGH CRUSADE by Poul Anderson. Doubleday & Co.

L. SPRAGUE de Camp was the most noted author after Mark Twain to mix medievalism and advanced technology. Anderson's latest seriously challenges the eminence of *Divide and Rule*, de Camp's famous *opus major*.

When Sir Roger de Tourneville was engaged in gathering an army to fight in France for his king, back in 1345, interstellar invaders had the poor luck to land their giant ship and attempt his subjugation. In the close fighting that ensued, the English mastery of man-to-man cutlery insured their victory. With the star ship at his command and a prisoner to operate it, logistics were no longer a problem. The entire English town could embark on a Crusade against the paynims of the Holy Land instead of the intended local action against the French.

Best-laid plans go notoriously astray, however, particularly when entrusted to a double-dealing ET. The ship, with its complement of armored knights,

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bowmen, pikemen, women, children, hogs, etc., makes instead a forced flight to the star empire of the invaders.

Characters are well-drawn; the tragic triangle of the principles reminiscent of Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot. The book is definitely a can't-be-put-down enthraller.

Rating: *****

COLLISION COURSE by Robert Silverberg. Avalon.

SILVERBERG'S STORY of first contact between alien civilizations, although not fresh or new, is nonetheless entertaining and deft.

Earth's extrasolar empire is limited in its expansion by the speed of light. Excitement runs high on the return of Earth's first faster-than-light ship with the unwelcome news of an alien civilization of at least equal scientific attainments — and unknown intentions.

How does one negotiate a treaty to divide the universe into spheres of influence when even basic communication is impossible? Silverberg's solutions are glib but, as noted, his story benefits from his sure control of pace.

Rating: ***

THE FIFTH GALAXY READER edited by H. L. Gold. Doubleday & Co.

EDITOR GOLD'S latest collection of short stories from *Galaxy*.

STAR OF STARS edited by Frederik Pohl. Doubleday and Co.

EDITOR POHL has skimmed the *creme de la creme* from the top of his *Star Science Fiction* series. In so doing, he has given the poor reviewer an almost hopeless task, comparable to selecting the tastiest raisin in the fruit cake.

However, and not in order of excellence, here are the super-duper topnotchers: Gerald Kersh, "Whatever Happened to Corporal Cuckoo?;" Alfred Bester, "Disappearing Act;" William Morrison, "Country Doctor;" Arthur C. Clarke, "The Deep Range;" H. L. Gold, "The Man with English;" Fritz Leiber, "Space-Time for Springers;" Jerome Bixby, "It's a *Good* Life."

This list has the unfortunate result of excluding yarns by Kuttner, Bloch, Kornbluth, Matheson, Williamson and others that would ordinarily rate high in any other company. But such is the fate of excellent when confronted with superlative.

Rating: *****

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HE OWNED THE WORLD by Charles Eric Maine. Avalon Books.

H. G. WELLS cut the basic pattern for almost every type of science-fiction yarn, including the prototype for Maine's story: the awakening of a long-dead individual to an inimical future over which he exercises complete economic control yet in which he is a helpless tool.

Maine's Sleeper is the first astronaut, unsuccessful in his attempt to orbit the moon. After 8,000 years of burial in space in his rocket tomb, he is returned to life by Martians, descendants of colonizing terrestrial scientists, now at war with Mother Earth.

The story is quite uneven, but the ending has a fillip.

Rating ***½

TWINKLE, TWINKLE, LITTLE STAR by Ben Barzman. G. P. Putnam's Sons.

NOTED FILM author Barzman's extremely winning story rests on a firm foundation; though short on science, it is long on story.

Barzman employs the well-worn device of a sister-world (populated with Terran counterparts, but diverging in development after World War I) as a mirror to point up our savagery and stupidity. The scientific partnership of an English girl, orphaned by Nazi bombs, and a Rumanian refugee whose child and Jewish wife were exterminated during WWII, makes possible the contact with the people of the utopian planet. They have developed far beyond us technically but particularly in their ability to coexist.

The appeal of the story lies in its main characters.

Rating: ****½

SHADOW HAWK by Andre Norton. Harcourt, Brace & Co.

MISS NORTON is at the tip of the top when it comes to penning science-adventure. That she also does exceptional historical fiction is attested to by such books as *Scarface* and *Sword in Sheath.* Of equal status is her latest book, a novel of the Middle Kingdom of ancient Egypt, the interim period between the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Dynasties.

Miss Norton has done an admirable job of recreating the distant past and has made one of history's earliest recorded fights against oppression ring with an urgency that entirely captivates the sympathy of her audience.

Rating: ****½

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HUNTERS OF SPACE by Joseph E. Kelleam. Avalon Books.

KELLEAM'S SEQUEL to *The Little Men* suffers from the same ills as its predecessor. Too much is happening for the author to bother with such trifles as credibility, characterization or motivation.

Rating: **

JUNIOR EDUCATIONAL CORNER: REALM OF MEASURE by Isaac Asimov. Houghton Mifflin Co.

SCIENCE-FACT AND -fictioneer Asimov turns from the "Realm of Numbers" to the theories and practices of measurement in his latest tome directed at a teenage audience. He traces its development from the use of portions of the human anatomy as standards to the abstract concepts that permitted testing of such theories as $e = MC^2$.

Dr. Asimov's pet peeve is the inertia that prevented the universal acceptance of the metric system, mankind's attempt to standardize the entire framework of measure. But no matter what his point, he is always informative and frequently downright entertaining in getting it across.

MEN, PLANETS AND STARS by Clyde B. Clason. G. P. Putnam's Sons.

HALF OF Clason's well-integrated book is devoted to prominent personalities and events in astronomical history. The remaining concerns present knowledge and some fascinating conjectures about the heavenly objects and universal theory.

SECRET UNDER THE SEA by Gordon R. Dickson. Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

GORDON DICKSON'S first juvenile is a jet-propelled wingding that crams all its action into two days of a boy's life.

The boy's parents are both marine biologists engaged in studying Martian water creatures brought back from ice caves within the red planet. Also the boy has an intelligent pet dolphin that helps him thwart the villains.

Conflict is provided by so-called Vandals, a cult of misguided bigots, who fear and attempt to destroy the monstrous Martians and by a savage killer whale who has the same idea. Action far outpaces plot but the sustained velocity of the former ensures a

Rating for youngsters: ***

—FLOYD C. GALE

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By JACK VANCE Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

Thissell was all set. He would capture the wanted man the second he showed his face. Trouble was, he wouldn't show it!

THE MOON MOTH

THE houseboat had been built to the most exacting standards of Sirenese craftsmanship — which is to say, as close to the absolute as human eye could detect. The planking of waxy dark wood showed no joints. The fastenings were platinum rivets countersunk and polished flat. In style, the boat was massive, broad-beamed, steady as the shore itself, without ponderosity or slackness of line. The bow bulged like a swan's breast, the stem rising high, then crooking forward to support an iron lantern. The doors were carved from slabs of a mottled black-green wood. The windows were many-sectioned, paned with squares of mica that were stained rose, blue, pale green and violet. The bow was given to service facilities and quarters for the slaves; amidships were a pair of sleeping cabins, a dining saloon and a parlor saloon, opening upon an observation deck at the stern.

Such was Edwer Thissell's houseboat, but ownership of it brought him neither pleasure nor pride. The houseboat had become shabby. The carpeting had lost its pile; the carved screens were shipped; the iron lantern at the bow sagged with rust. Seventy years ago the first owner, on ac-

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cepting the boat, had honored the builder and had been likewise honored. The transaction (for the process represented a great deal more than simple giving and taking) had augmented the prestige of both. That time was far gone. The houseboat now commanded no prestige whatever.

Edwer Thissell, resident on Sirene only three months, recognized the lack but could do nothing about it: this particular houseboat was the best he could get. He sat on the rear deck practising the *ganga*, a zither-like instrument not much larger than his hand. A hundred yards inshore surf defined a strip of white beach. Beyond rose jungle, with the silhouette of craggy black hills against the sky. Mireille shone hazy and white overhead, as if through a tangle of spider-web; the face of the ocean pooled and puddled with mother-of-pearl luster. The scene had become as familiar, though not as boring, as the *ganga*, at which he had worked two hours, twanging out the Sirenese scales, forming chords, traversing simple progressions. Now he put down the *ganga* for the *zachinko*, this a small soundbox studded with keys, played with the right hand. Pressure on the keys forced air through reeds in the keys themselves, producing a concertina-like tone. This-

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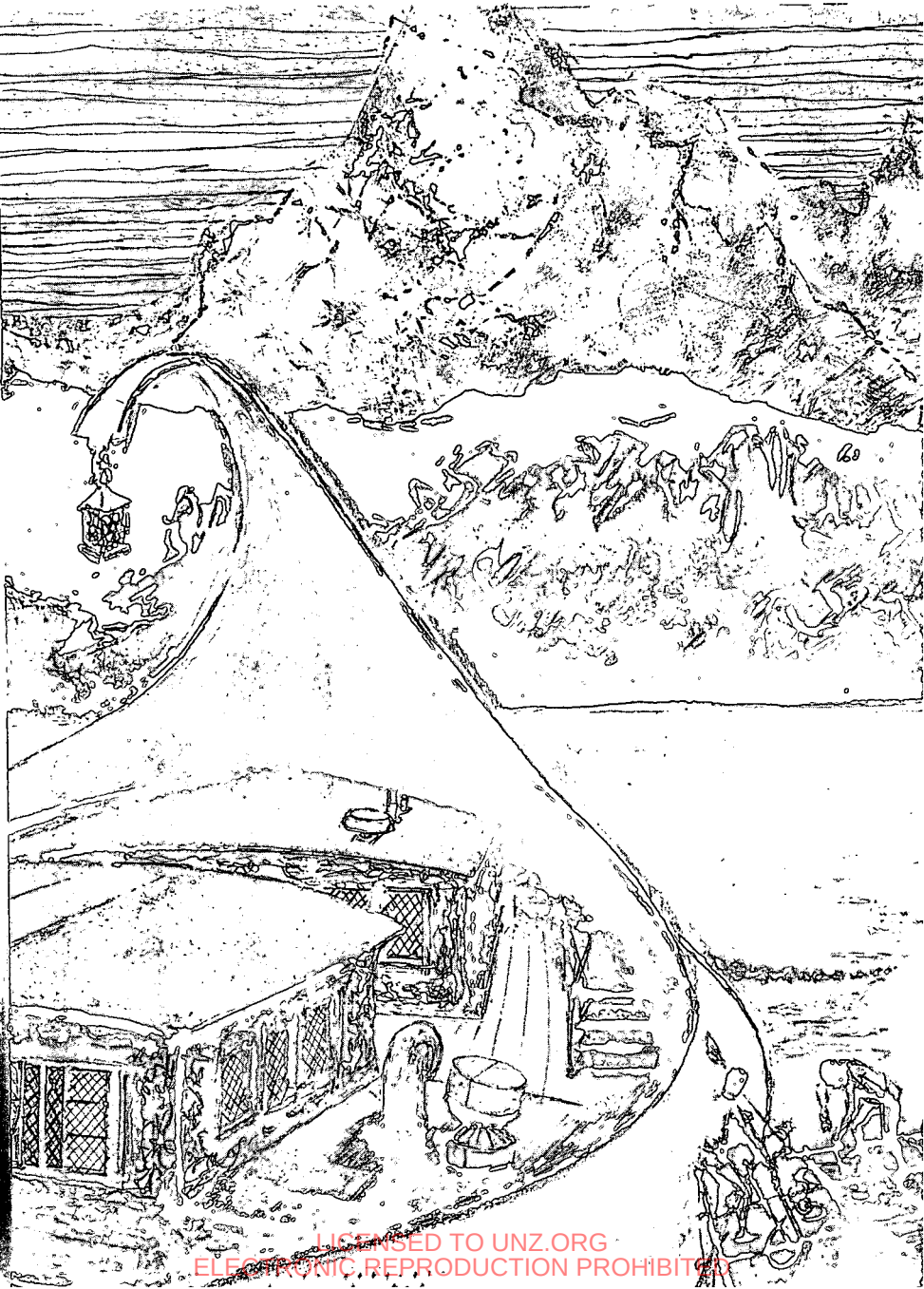

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sell ran off a dozen quick scales, making very few mistakes. Of the six instruments he had set himself to learn, the *zachinko* had proved the least refractory (with the exception, of course, of the *hymerkin,* that clacking, slapping, clattering device of wood and stone used exclusively with the slaves.)

THISSELL practiced another ten minutes, then put aside the *zachinko.* He flexed his arms, wrung his aching fingers. Every waking moment since his arrival had been given to the instruments: the *hymerkin,* the *ganga,* the *zachinko,* the *kiv,* the *strapan,* the *gomapard.* He had practiced scales in twenty-four keys and four modes, chords without number, intervals never imagined on the Home Planets. Trills, arpeggios, slurs; click-stops and nasalization; damping and augmentation of overtones, vibratos and wolf-tones; concavities and convexities. He practiced with a dogged, deadly diligence, in which his original concept of music as a source of pleasure had long become lost. Looking over the instruments Thissell resisted an urge to fling all six into the Titanic.

He rose to his feet, went forward through the parlor saloon, the dining saloon, along a corridor past the galley and came out on the fore-deck. He bent over the rail, peered down into the underwater pens where Toby and Rex, the slaves, were harnessing the dray-fish for the weekly trip to Fan, eight miles north. The youngest fish, either playful or captious, ducked and plunged. Its streaming black muzzle broke water, and Thissell, looking into its face felt a peculiar qualm: the fish wore no mask!

Thissell laughed uneasily, fingering his own mask, which was in the design of the Moon-Moth. No question about it, he was becoming acclimated to Sirene! A significant stage had been reached when the naked face of a fish caused him shock!

The fish were finally harnessed; Toby and Rex climbed aboard, red bodies glistening, black cloth masks clinging to their faces. Ignoring Thissell they stowed the pen and hoisted anchor. The dray-fish strained, the harness tautened, the houseboat moved north.

Returning to the after-deck, Thissell took up the *strapan* — this a circular sound-box eight inches in diameter. Forty-six wires radiated from a central hub to the circumference, where they connected to either a bell or a tinkle-bar. When plucked, the bells rang and the bars chimed; when strummed, the instrument

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gave off a twanging, jingling sound. When played with competence, the pleasantly acid dissonances produced an expressive effect; in an unskilled hand, the results were less felicitous, and might even approach random noise. The *strapan* was Thissell's weakest instrument. He practiced with concentration during the entire trip north.

In due course the houseboat approached the floating city. The dray-fish were curbed, the houseboat warped to a mooring. Along the dock a line of idlers weighed and gauged every aspect of the houseboat, the slaves and Thissell himself, according to Sirenese habit. Thissell, not yet accustomed to such penetrating inspection, found the scrutiny unsettling, all the more so for the immobility of the masks. Self-consciously adjusting his own Moon-Moth, he climbed the ladder to the dock.

A SLAVE rose from where he had been squatting, touched knuckles to the black cloth at his forehead, and sang on a three-tone phrase of interrogation: "The Moon-Moth before me possibly expresses the identity of Ser Edwer Thissell?"

Thissell tapped the *hymerkin* which hung at his belt and sang: "I am Ser Thissell."

"I have been honored by a trust," sang the slave. "Three days from dawn to dusk I have waited on the dock; three nights from dusk to dawn I have crouched on a raft below this same dock listening to the feet of the Night-men. At last I behold the mask of Ser Thissell."

Thissell evoked an impatient clatter from the *hymerkin*. "What is the nature of this trust?"

"I carry a message, Ser Thissell. It is intended for you."

Thissell held out his left hand, playing the *hymerkin* with his right. "Give me the message."

"Instantly, Ser Thisssell."

The message bore a heavy superscription:

EMERGENCY COMMUNICATION! RUSH!

Thissell ripped open the envelope. The message was signed by Castel Cromartin, Chief Executive of the Interworld Policies Board. After the formal salutation, it read:

> ABSOLUTELY URGENT the following orders be executed! Aboard *Carina Cruzeiro*, destination Fan, date of arrival January 10 U.T., is notorious assassin, Haxo Angmark. Meet landing with adequate authority, effect detention and incarceration of this man. These instructions must be successfully

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implemented. Failure is unacceptable.

ATTENTION! Haxo Angmark is superlatively dangerous. Kill him without hesitation at any show of resistance.

Thissell considered the message with dismay.

In coming to Fan as Consular Representative he had expected nothing like this. He felt neither inclination nor competence in the matter of dealing with dangerous assassins. Thoughtfully he rubbed the fuzzy gray cheek of his mask. The situation was not completely dark; Esteban Rolver, Director of the Space-Port, would doubtless cooperate, and perhaps furnish a platoon of slaves.

More hopefully, Thissell reread the message. January 10, Universal Time. He consulted a conversion calendar. Today, 40th in the Season of Bitter Nectar — Thissell ran his finger down the column, stopped. January 10 was today!

A distant rumble caught his attention. Dropping from the mist came a dull shape: the lighter returning from contact with the *Carina Cruzeiro.*

Thissell once more re-read the note, raised his head, studied the descending lighter. Aboard would be Haxo Angmark. In five minutes he would emerge upon the soil of Sirene. Landing formalities would detain him possibly twenty minutes. The landing field lay a mile and a half distant, joined to Fan by a winding path through the hills.

THISSELL turned to the slave. "When did this message arrive?"

The slave leaned forward uncomprehendingly. Thissell reiterated his question, singing to the clack of the *hymerkin:* "This message, you have enjoyed the honor of its custody how long?"

The slave sang: "Long days have I waited on the wharf, retreating only to the raft at the onset of dusk. Now my vigil is rewarded; I behold Ser Thissell."

Thissell turned away and walked furiously up the dock. Ineffective, inefficient Sirenese! Why had they not delivered the message to his houseboat? Twenty-five minutes — twenty-two now . . .

At the esplanade Thissell stopped and looked right and left, hoping for a miracle — perhaps some sort of air-transport to whisk him to the space-port, where, with Rolver's aid, Haxo Angmark might still be detained. Or, better yet, a second message canceling the first. Something, anything . . . But air-cars were not to be found on Sirene, and no second message appeared.

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Across the esplanade rose a meager row of permanent structures, built of stone and iron and so proof against the efforts of the Night-men. A hostler occupied one of these structures, and as Thissell watched a man in a splendid pearl and silver mask emerged riding one of the lizard-like mounts of Sirene.

Thissell sprang forward. There was still time; with luck he might yet intercept Haxo Angmark. He hurried across the esplanade.

Before the line of stalls stood the hostler, inspecting his stock with solicitude, occasionally burnishing a scale or whisking away an insect. There were five of the beasts in prime condition, each as tall as a man's shoulder, with massive legs, thick bodies, heavy wedge-shaped heads. From their fore-fangs, which had been artificially lengthened and curved into near-circles, gold rings depended. Their scales had been stained in diaper-pattern: purple and green, orange and black, red and blue, brown and pink, yellow and silver.

Thissell came to a breathless halt in front of the hostler. He reached for his *kiv*, then hesitated. The *kiv* — five banks of resilient metal strips, fourteen to the bank, played by touching, twisting, twanging — might not be appropriate. Could this be considered a casual personal encounter? The *zachinko* perhaps? But the statement of his needs hardly seemed to demand the formal approach. Better the *kiv* after all. He struck a chord, but by error found himself stroking the *ganga*.

Beneath his mask Thissell grinned apologetically. His relationship with this hostler was by no means on an intimate basis. He hoped that the hostler was of sanguine disposition, and in any event the urgency of the occasion allowed no time to select an exactly appropriate instrument. He struck a second chord and, playing as well as agitation, breathlessness and lack of skill allowed, sang out a request: "Ser Hostler, I have immediate need of a swift mount. Allow me to select from your herd."

THE hostler wore a mask of considerable complexity which Thissell could not identify: a construction of varnished brown cloth, pleated gray leather and high on the forehead two large green and scarlet globes, minutely segmented like insect eyes. He inspected Thissell a long moment. Then, rather ostentatiously selecting his *stimic*, he executed a brilliant progression of trills and rounds.

Thissell failed to grasp the import. The *stimic* — three flute-

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like tubes equipped with plungers; thumb and forefinger squeezing a bag to force air across the mouthpieces, second, third and fourth fingers manipulating the slide — was an instrument well adapted to the sentiments of cool withdrawal, or even disapproval; but how cool Thissell was not sure. The hostler sang: "Ser Moon-Moth, I fear that my steeds are unsuitable to a person of your distinction."

Thissell earnestly twanged at the *ganga*. "By no means! They all seem adequate. I am in great haste and will gladly accept any of the group."

The hostler played a brittle cascading crescendo: "Ser Moon-Moth," he sang, "the steeds are ill and dirty. I am flattered that you consider them adequate to your use, but I cannot accept the merit you offer me. And —" here, switching instruments, he struck a cool tinkle from his *krodatch* — "somehow I fail to recognize the boon companion and co-craftsman who accosts me so familiarly with his *ganga*."

The implications were clear. The use of the *krodatch* alone made its point, for the small, square sound-box strung with resined gut, in playing which the musician scratched the strings with his fingernail, or stroked them with his fingertips, produced quietly formal sounds. The *krodatch* was an instrument of rejection or even of insult. Thissell would receive no mount.

He turned and set off at a run for the landing field. Behind him sounded the clatter of the hostler's *hymerkin* — whether directed at himself or at the hostler's slaves Thissell did not pause to learn.

II

THE previous Consular Representative of the Home Planets on Sirene had been killed at Zundar. Masked as a Tavern Bravo he had accosted a girl beribboned for the Equinoctial Attitudes, a solecism for which he had been instantly beheaded by a Red Demiurge, a Sun Sprite and a Magic Hornet. Edwer Thissell, recently graduated from the Institute, had been named his successor, and allowed three days to prepare himself.

Normally of a contemplative, even cautious, disposition. Thissell had regarded the appointment as a challenge. He learned the Sirenese language by subcerebral techniques, and found it uncomplicated. Then, in the Journal of Universal Anthropology, he read:

> The population of the Titanic littoral is highly individualistic, possibly in response to a bounti-

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ful environment which puts no premium upon group activity. The language, reflecting this trait, expresses the individual's mood, and his emotional attitude toward a given situation. Factual information is regarded as a secondary concomitant. Moreover, the language is sung, characteristically to the accompaniment of a small instrument. As a result, there is great difficulty in ascertaining fact from a native of Fan, or the forbidden city Zundar. One will be regaled with elegant arias and demonstrations of astonishing virtuosity upon one or another of the numerous musical instruments. The visitor to this fascinating world, unless he cares to be treated with the most consummate contempt, must therefore learn to express himself after the approved local fashion.

Thissell made a note in his memorandum book: *Procure small musical instrument, together with directions as to use.* He read on.

There is everywhere and at all times a plenitude, not to say a superfluity, of food, and the climate is benign. With a fund of racial energy and a great deal of leisure time, the population occupies itself with intricacy. Intricacy in all things: intricate craftmanship, such as the carved panels which adorn the houseboats; intricate symbolism, as exemplified in the masks worn by everyone; the intricate half-musical language which admirably expresses subtle moods and emotions; and, above all, the fantastic intricacy of interpersonal relationships. Prestige, face, *mana*, repute, glory: the Sirenese word is *strakh*. Every man has his characteristic *strakh*, which determines whether, when he needs a houseboat, he will be urged to avail himself of a floating palace, rich with gems, alabaster lanterns, peacock faience and carved wood, or grudgingly permitted an abandoned shack on a raft. There is no medium of exchange on Sirene; the single and sole currency is *strakh*.

Thissell rubbed his chin and read further.

Masks are worn at all times, in accordance with the philosophy that a man should not be compelled to use a similitude foisted upon him by factors beyond his control. In the Sirenese view, he should be at liberty to choose that semblance most consonant with his *strakh*. In the civilized areas of Sirene — which is to say the Titanic littoral — a man literally never shows his face. It is his basic secret.

Gambling, by this token, is unknown on Sirene. It would be catastrophic to Sirenese self-respect to gain advantage by means other than the exercise of *strakh*. The word "luck" has

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no counterpart in the Sirenese language.

Thissell made another note: *Get mask. Museum? Drama guild?*

He finished the article, hastened forth to complete his preparations, and the next day embarked aboard the *Robart Astroguard* for the first leg of the passage to Sirene.

THE lighter settled upon the Sirenese space-port, a topaz disk isolated among the black, green and purple hills. The lighter grounded, and Edwer Thissell stepped forth. He was met by Esteban Rolver, the local agent for Spaceways. Rolver threw up his hands, and stepped back. "Your mask," he cried huskily. "Where is your mask?"

Thissell held it up rather self-consciously. "I wasn't sure — "

"Put it on," said Rolver, turning away. He himself wore a fabrication of dull green scales on blue-lacquered wood. Black quills protruded at the cheeks, and under his chin hung a black and white checked pom-pom, the total effect creating a sense of sardonic supple personality.

Thissell adjusted the mask to his face, undecided whether to make a joke about the situation or to maintain a reserve suitable to the dignity of his post.

"Are you masked?" Rolver inquired over his shoulder.

Thissell replied in the affirmative and Rolver turned. The mask hid the expression of his face, but his hand unconsciously flicked a set of keys strapped to his thigh. The instrument sounded a trill of shock and polite consternation. "You can't wear that mask!" sang Rolver. "In fact — how did you get it?"

"It's copied from a mask owned by the Polypolis museum," said Thissell stiffly. "I'm sure it's authentic."

Rolver nodded, his own mask more sardonic-seeming than ever. "It's authentic enough. It's a variant of the type known as the Sea-Dragon Conqueror, and is worn on ceremonial occasions by persons of enormous prestige: princes, heroes, master craftsmen, great musicians."

"I wasn't aware — "

Rolver made a gesture of languid understanding. "It's something you'll learn in due course. Notice my mask. Today I'm wearing a Tarn-Bird. Persons of minimal prestige — such as you, I, any other out-worlder — wear this sort of thing."

"Odd," said Thissell as they started across the field toward a low concrete blockhouse. "I assumed that a person wore whatever mask he liked."

"Certainly," said Rolver.

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"Wear any mask you like — if you can make it stick. This Tarn-Bird for instance. I wear it to indicate that I presume nothing. I make no claims to wisdom, ferocity, versatility, musicianship, truculence or any of a dozen other Sirenese virtues."

"For the sake of argument," said Thissell, "what would happen if I walked through the streets of Zundar in this mask?"

ROLVER laughed, a muffled sound behind his mask. "If you walked along the docks of Zundar — there are no streets — in *any* mask, you'd be killed within the hour. That's what happened to Benko, your predecessor. He didn't know how to act. None of us out-worlders know how to act. In Fan we're tolerated — so long as we keep our place. But you couldn't even walk around Fan in that regalia you're sporting now. Somebody wearing a Fire-Snake or a Thunder Goblin mask would step up to you. He'd play his *krodatch,* and if you failed to challenge his audacity with a passage on the *skaranyi,* a devilish instrument, like a baby bagpipe, he'd play his *hymerkin* — the instrument we use with the slaves. That's the ultimate expression of contempt. Or he might ring his dueling-gong and attack you then and there."

"I had no idea that people here were quite so irascible," said Thissell in a subdued voice.

Rolver shrugged and swung open the massive steel door into his office. "Certain acts may not be committed even on the Concourse at Polypolis without incurring criticism."

"Yes, that's quite true," said Thissell. He looked around the office. "Why all the concrete and steel?"

"Protection against the savages," said Rolver. "They come down from the mountains at night, steal what's available, kill anyone they find ashore." He went to a closet and brought forth a mask. "Here. Use this Moon-Moth; it won't get you in trouble."

Thissell unenthusiastically inspected the mask. It was constructed of mouse-colored fur. There was a tuft of hair at each side of the mouth-hole, a pair of feather-like antennae at the forehead. White lace flaps dangled beside the temples, and under the eyes hung a series of red folds, creating an effect at once lugubrious and comic.

Thissell asked, "Does this mask signify any degree of prestige?"

"Not a great deal."

"After all, I'm Consular Representative," said Thissell. "I represent the Home Planets, a hundred billion people — "

"If the Home Planets want their representative to wear a Sea

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Dragon Conqueror mask, they'd better send out a Sea Dragon Conqueror man."

"I see," said Thissell in a subdued voice.

ROLVER politely averted his gaze while Thissell doffed the Sea Dragon Conqueror and slipped the more modest Moon-Moth over his head. "I suppose I can find something just a bit more suitable in one of the shops," Thissell said. "I'm told a person simply goes in and takes what he needs, correct?"

Rolver surveyed Thissell critically. "That mask — temporarily, at least — is perfectly suitable. It's rather important not to take anything from the shops until you know the *strakh* value of the article you want. The owner loses prestige if a person of low *strakh* makes free with his best work."

Thissell shook his head in exasperation. "Nothing of this was explained to me! I knew of the masks, of course, and the painstaking integrity of the craftsmen, but this insistence on prestige — *strakh*, whatever the word is . . ."

"No matter," said Rolver. "After a year or two you'll begin to learn your way around. I suppose you speak the language?"

"Oh, indeed. Certainly."

"And what instruments do you play?"

"Well — I was given to understand that any small instrument was adequate, or that I could merely sing."

"Very inaccurate. Only slaves sing without accompaniment. I suggest that you learn the following instruments as quickly as possible: the *hymerkin* for your slaves. The *ganga* for conversation between intimates or one a trifle lower than yourself in *strakh*. The *kiv* for casual polite intercourse. The *zachinko* for more formal dealings. The *strapan* or the *krodatch* for your social inferiors — in your case, to insult someone, since you have no inferiors. The *gomapard* or the *double-kamanthil* for ceremonials." The *gomapard* was one of the few electric instruments used on Sirene. An oscillator produced an oboe-like tone, modulated, choked, vibrated, raised and lowered in pitch by four keys. The *double-kamanthil* was similar to the *ganga*, except the tones were produced by twisting and inclining a disk of resined leather against one or more of the forty-six strings. Rolver considered a moment. "The *crebarin*, the water-lute and the *slobo* are highly useful also — but perhaps you'd better learn the other instruments first. They should provide at least a rudimentary means of communication."

"Aren't you exaggerating?" suggested Thissell. "Or joking?"

Rolver laughed his saturnine

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laugh. "Not at all. Also you'll need a houseboat and slaves."

ROLVER took Thissell from the landing field to the docks of Fan, a walk of an hour and a half along a pleasant path under enormous trees loaded with fruit, cereal pods, sacs of sugary sap.

"At the moment," said Rolver, "there are only four out-worlders in Fan, counting yourself. I'll take you to Welibus, our Commercial Factor. I think he's got an old houseboat he might let you use."

Cornely Welibus had resided fifteen years in Fan, acquiring sufficient *strakh* to wear his South Wind mask with authority. This consisted of a blue disk inlaid with cabochons of lapis-lazuli, surrounded by an aureole of shimmering snake-skin. Heartier and more cordial than Rolver, he not only provided Thissell with a houseboat, but also a score of various musical instruments and a pair of slaves.

Embarrassed by the largesse, Thissell stammered something about payment, but Welibus cut him off with an expansive gesture. "My dear fellow, this is Sirene. Such trifles cost nothing."

"But a houseboat — "

Welibus played a courtly little flourish on his *kiv*. "I'll be frank, Ser Thissell. The boat is old and a trifle shabby. I can't afford to use it; my status would suffer." A graceful melody accompanied his words. "Status as yet need not concern you. You require merely shelter, comfort and safety from the Night-men."

"Night-men?"

"The cannibals who roam the shore after dark."

"Oh yes. Ser Rolver mentioned them."

"Horrible things. We don't discuss them." A shuddering little trill issured from his *kiv*. "Now, as to slaves." He tapped the blue disk of his mask with a thoughtful forefinger. "Rex and Toby should serve you well." He raised his voice, played a swift clatter on the *hymerkin*. *"Avan esx trobu!"*

A female slave appeared wearing a dozen tight bands of pink cloth, and a dainty black mask sparkling with mother-of-pearl sequins.

"Fascu etz Rex ae Toby."

Rex and Toby appeared, wearing loose masks of black cloth, russet jerkins. Welibus addressed them with a resonant clatter of *hymerkin*, enjoining them to the service of their new master, on pain of return to their native islands. They prostrated themselves, sang pledges of servitude to Thissell in soft husky voices. Thissell laughed nervously and essayed a sentence in the Sirenese language. "Go to the houseboat,

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clean it well, bring aboard a supply of food."

Toby and Rex stared blankly through the holes in their masks. Welibus repeated the orders with *hymerkin* accompaniment. The slaves bowed and departed without farewells.

Thissell surveyed the musical instruments with dismay. "I haven't the slightest idea how to go about learning how to play these things."

Welibus turned to Rolver. "What about Kershaul? Could he be persuaded to give Ser Thissell some basic instruction?"

Rolver nodded judicially. "Kershaul might undertake the job."

Thissell asked, "Who is Kershaul?"

"The third of our little group of expatriates," replied Welibus, "An anthropologist. You've read *Zundar the Splendid? Rituals of Sirene? The Faceless Folk?* No? A pity. All excellent works. Kershaul is high in prestige, and I believe visits Zundar from time to time. Wears a Cave-Owl, sometimes a Star Wanderer or even a Wise Arbiter."

"He's taken to an Equatorial Serpent," said Rolver. "The variant with the gilt tusks."

"Indeed!" marveled Welibus. "Well, I must say he's earned it. A fine fellow, good chap indeed." And he strummed his *zachinko* thoughtfully.

III

THREE months passed. Under the tutelage of Mathew Kershaul, Thissell practiced the *hymerkin*, the *ganga*, the *strapan*, the *kiv*, the *gomapard*, and the *zachinko*. The others could wait, said Kershaul, until Thissel had mastered the six basic instruments. He lent Thissell recordings of noteworthy Sirenese conversing in various moods and to various accompaniments, so that Thissell might learn the melodic conventions currently in vogue, and perfect himself in the niceties of intonation, the various rhythms, cross-rhythms, compound rhythms, implied rhythms and suppressed rhythms. Kershaul professed to find Sirenese music a fascinating study, and Thissell admitted that it was a subject not readily exhausted. The quarter-tone tuning of the instruments admitted the use of twenty-four tonalities which, multiplied by the five modes in general use, resulted in one hundred and twenty separate scales. Kershaul, however, advised that Thissell primarily concentrate on learning each instrument in its fundamental tonality, using only two of the modes.

With no immediate business at Fan except the weekly visits to Mathew Kershaul, Thissell took

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his houseboat eight miles south and moored it in the lee of a rocky promontory. Here, if it had not been for the incessant practicing, Thissell lived an idyllic life. The sea was calm and crystal-clear; the beach, fringed by the gray, green and purple foliage of the forest, lay close at hand if he wanted to stretch his legs.

Toby and Rex occupied a pair of cubicles forward. Thissell had the after-cabins to himself. From time to time he toyed with the idea of a third slave, possibly a young female, to contribute an element of charm and gaiety to the menage . . . But Kershaul advised against the step, fearing that the intensity of Thissell's concentration might somehow be diminished. Thissell acquiesced and devoted himself to the study of the six instruments.

The days passed quickly. Thissell never became bored with the pageantry of dawn and sunset; the white clouds and blue sea of noon; the night sky blazing with the twenty-nine stars of Cluster SI 1-715. The weekly trip to Fan broke the tedium. Toby and Rex foraged for food; Thissell visited the luxurious houseboat of Mathew Kershaul for instruction and advice.

Then, three months after Thissell's arrival, came the message completely disorganizing the routine: Haxo Angmark, assassin, *agent provocateur*, ruthless and crafty criminal, had come to Sirene. "Effect detention and incarceration of this man!" read the orders. "Attention! Haxo Angmark is superlatively dangerous. Kill without hesitation!"

THISSELL was not in the best of condition. He trotted fifty yards until his breath came in gasps, then walked — through low hills crowned with white bamboo and black tree-ferns; across meadows yellow with grass-nuts, through orchards and wild vineyards. Twenty minutes passed, twenty-five minutes. With a heavy sensation in his stomach Thissell knew that he was too late. Haxo Angmark had landed, and might be traversing this very road toward Fan.

But along the way Thissell met only four persons: a boy-child in a mock-fierce Alk-Islander mask; two young women wearing the Red-bird and the Green-bird; a man masked as a Forest Goblin. Coming upon the man, Thissell stopped short. Could this be Angmark?

Thissell essayed a strategem. He went boldly to the man, stared into the hideous mask. "Angmark," he called in the language of the Home Planets, "you are under arrest!"

The Forest Goblin stared un-

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forward along the track.

Thissell put himself in the way. He reached for his *ganga*, then recalling the hostler's reaction, instead struck a chord on the *zachinko*. "You travel the road from the space-port," he sang. "What have you seen there?"

The Forest Goblin grasped his hand-bugle, an instrument used to deride opponents on the field of battle, to summon animals or occasionally to evince a rough and ready truculence. "Where I travel and what I see are the concern solely of myself. Stand back or I walk upon your face." He marched forward. Had not Thissell leapt aside the Forest Goblin might well have made good his threat.

Thissell stood gazing after the retreating back. Angmark? Not likely, with so sure a touch on the hand-bugle. Thissell hesitated, then turned and continued on his way.

Arriving at the space-port, he went directly to the office. The heavy door stood ajar; as Thissell approached, a man appeared in the doorway. He wore a mask of dull green scales, mica plates, blue-lacquered wood and black quills — the Tarn-Bird.

"Ser Rolver," Thissell called out anxiously, "who came down from the *Carina Cruzeiro?*"

Rolver studied Thissell a long moment, "Why do you ask?"

"Why do I ask?" demanded Thissell. "You must have seen the space-gram I received from Castel Cromartin!"

"Oh, yes," said Rolver. "Of course. Naturally."

"It was delivered only half an hour ago," said Thissell bitterly. "I rushed out as fast as I could. Where is Angmark?"

"In Fan, I assume," said Rolver.

Thissell cursed softly. "Why didn't you delay him?"

Rolver shrugged. "I had neither authority, inclination nor the capability to stop him."

Thissell fought back his annoyance. In a voice of studied calm he said, "On the way I passed a man in rather a ghastly mask — saucer eyes, red wattles."

"A Forest Goblin," said Rolver. "Angmark brought the mask with him."

"But he played the hand-bugle," Thissell protested. "How could Angmark — "

"He's well-acquainted with Sirene. He spent five years here in Fan."

Thissell grunted in annoyance. "Cromartin made no mention of this."

"It's common knowledge," said Rolver with a shrug. "He was Commercial Representative be-

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fore Welibus took over, a long time ago."

"Were he and Welibus acquainted?"

Rolver laughed shortly. "Naturally. But don't suspect poor Welibus of anything more venial than juggling his accounts. I assure you he's no consort of assassins."

"Speaking of assassins," said Thissell, "do you have a weapon I might borrow?"

Rolver inspected him in wonder. "You came out here to take Angmark bare-handed?"

"I had no choice," said Thissell. "When Cromartin gives orders he expects results. In any event you were here with your slaves."

"Don't count on me for help," Rolver said testily. "I wear the Tarn-Bird and make no pretensions of valor. But I can lend you a power-pistol. I haven't used it recently; I won't guarantee its charge."

"Anything is better than nothing," said Thissell.

Rolver went into the office and a moment later returned with the gun. "What will you do now?"

Thissell shook his head wearily. "I'll try to find Angmark in Fan. Or might he head for Zundar?"

Rolver considered. "Angmark might be able to survive in Zundar. But he'd want to brush up on his musicianship. I imagine he'll stay in Fan a few days."

"But how can I find him? Where should I look?"

"That I can't say," replied Rolver. "You might be safer not finding him. Angmark is a dangerous man."

THISSELL returned to Fan the way he had come.

Where the path swung down from the hills into the esplanade a thick-walled *pisé-de-terre* building had been constructed. The door was carved from a solid black plank; the windows were guarded by enfoliated bands of iron. This was the office of Cornely Welibus, Commercial Factor, Importer and Exporter. Thissell found Welibus sitting at his ease on the tiled verandah, wearing a modest adaptation of the Waldemar mask. He seemed lost in thought. He might or might not have recognized Thissell's Moon-Moth; in any event he gave no signal of greeting.

Thissell approached the porch. "Good morning, Ser Welibus."

Welibus nodded abstractedly and said in a flat voice, plucking lazily at his *kradatch*, "Good morning."

Thissell was rather taken aback. This was hardly the instrument to use toward a friend and fellow-out-worlder, even if he did wear the Moon-Moth.

Thissell said coldly, "May I

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ask how long you have been sitting here?"

Welibus considered half a minute. When he spoke he accompanied himself on the more cordial *crebarin*. But the recollection of the *krodatch* chord still rankled in Thissell's mind.

"I've been here fifteen or twenty minutes. Why do you ask?"

"I wonder if you noticed a Forest Goblin pass?"

Welibus nodded. "He went on down the esplanade — turned into that first mask shop, I believe."

Thissell hissed between his teeth. This would naturally be Angmark's first move. "I'll never find him once he changes masks," he muttered.

"Who is this Forest Goblin?" asked Welibus, with no more than casual interest.

Thissell could see no reason to conceal the name. "A notorious criminal: Haxo Angmark."

"Haxo Angmark!" croaked Welibus, leaning back in his chair. "You're sure he's here?"

"Reasonably sure."

Welibus rubbed his shaking hands together. "This is bad news — bad news indeed! He's an unscrupulous scoundrel."

"You knew him well?"

"As well as anyone." Welibus was now accompanying himself with the *kiv*. "He held the post I now occupy. I came out as an inspector and found that he was embezzling some four thousand UMI's a month. I'm sure he feels no great gratitude toward me." Welibus glanced nervously up the esplanade. "I hope you catch him."

"I'm doing my best. He went into the mask shop, you say?"

"I'm sure of it."

Thissell turned away. As he went down the path he heard the black plank door thud shut behind him.

HE walked down the esplanade to the mask-maker's shop, and paused outside as if admiring the display: a hundred miniature masks, carved from rare woods and minerals, dressed with emerald flakes, spiderweb silk, wasp wings, petrified fish scales and the like. The shop was empty except for the mask-maker, a gnarled knotty man in a yellow robe, wearing a deceptively simple Universal Expert mask, fabricated from over two thousand bits of articulated wood.

Thissell considered what he would say and how he would accompany himself, then entered. The mask-maker, noting the Moon-Moth and Thissell's diffident manner, continued with his work.

Thissell, selecting the easiest of his instruments, stroked his

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strapan — possibly not the most felicitous choice, for it conveyed a certain degree of condescension. Thissell tried to counteract this flavor by singing in warm, almost effusive, tones, shaking the *strapan* whimsically when he struck a wrong note: "A stranger is an interesting person to deal with; his habits are unfamiliar, he excites curiosity. Not twenty minutes ago a stranger entered this fascinating shop, to exchange his drab Forest Goblin for one of the remarkable and adventurous creations assembled on the premises."

The mask-maker turned Thissell a side glance. Without words he played a progression of chords on an instrument Thissell had never seen before: a flexible sac gripped in the palm with three short tubes leading between the fingers. When the tubes were squeezed almost shut and air forced through the slit, an oboe-like tone ensued. To Thissell's developing ear the instrument seemed difficult, the mask-maker expert; the music conveyed a profound sense of disinterest.

Thissell tried again, laboriously manipulating the *strapan*. He sang, "To an out-worlder on a foreign planet, the voice of one from his home is like water to a wilting plant. A person who could unite two such persons might find satisfaction in such an act of mercy." Even to his own ears the notes rang false.

The mask-maker casually fingered his own *strapan*, and drew forth a set of rippling scales, his fingers moving faster than the eyes could follow. He sang in the formal style: "An artist values his moments of concentration. He does not care to spend time exchanging banalities with persons of at best average prestige." Thissell attempted to insert a counter melody, but the mask-maker struck a new set of complex chords whose portent evaded Thissell's understanding, and continued: "Into the shop comes a person who evidently has picked up for the first time an instrument of unparalleled complication, for the execution of his music is open to criticism. He sings of homesickness and longing for the sight of others like himself. He dissembles his enormous *strakh* behind a Moon-Moth, for he plays the *strapan* to a Master Craftsman, and sings in a voice of contemptuous raillery. The refined and creative artist ignores the provocation. He plays a polite instrument, remains noncommittal, and trusts that the stranger will tire of his sport and depart."

THISSELL took up his *kiv*. "The noble mask-maker completely misunderstands me — "

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He was interrupted by staccato rasping of the mask-maker's *strapan.* "The stranger now sees fit to ridicule the artist's comprehension."

Thissell scratched furiously at his *strapan:* "To protect myself from the heat, I wander into a small and unpretentious mask-shop. The artisan, though still distracted by the novelty of his tools, gives promise of development. He works zealously to perfect his skill, so much so that he refuses to converse with strangers, no matter what their need."

The mask-maker carefully laid down his carving tool. He rose to his feet, went behind a screen, and shortly returned wearing a mask of gold and iron, with simulated flames licking up from the scalp. In one hand he carried a *skaranyi,* in the other a scimitar. He struck off a brilliant series of wild tones, and sang. "Even the most accomplished artist can augment his *strakh* by killing sea-monsters, Night-men and importunate idlers. Such an occasion is at hand. The artist delays his attack exactly ten seconds, because the offender wears a Moon-Moth." He twirled his scimitar and spun it in the air.

Thissell desperately pounded the *strapan.* "Did a Forest Goblin enter the shop? Did he depart with a new mask?"

"Five seconds have elapsed," sang the mask-maker in steady ominous rhythm.

Thissell departed in frustrated rage.

He crossed the square and stood looking up and down the esplanade. Hundreds of men and women sauntered along the docks, or stood on the decks of their houseboats, each wearing a mask chosen to express his mood, prestige and special attributes, and everywhere sounded the twitter of musical instruments.

Thissell stood at a loss. The Forest Goblin had disappeared. Haxo Angmark walked at liberty in Fan, and Thissell had failed the urgent instructions of Castel Cromartin.

Behind him sounded the casual notes of a *kiv.* "Ser Moon-Moth Thissell, you stand engrossed in thought."

THISSELL turned, to find beside him a Cave-Owl, in a somber cloak of black and gray. Thissell recognized the mask, which symbolized erudition and patient exploration of abstract ideas. Mathew Kershaul had worn it on the occasion of their meeting a week before.

"Good morning, Ser Kershaul," muttered Thissell.

"And how are the studies coming? Have you mastered the C-Sharp Plus scale on the *gomapard?* As I recall, you were

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finding those inverse intervals puzzling."

"I've worked on them," said Thissell in a gloomy voice. "However, since I'll probably be recalled to Polypolis, it may be all time wasted."

"Eh? What's this?"

Thissell explained the situation in regard to Haxo Angmark. Kershaul nodded gravely. "I recall Angmark. Not a gracious personality, but an excellent musician, with quick fingers and a real talent for new instruments." Thoughtfully he twisted the goatee of his Cave Owl mask. "What are your plans?"

"They're non-existent," said Thissell, playing a doleful phrase on the *kiv*. "I haven't any idea what masks he'll be wearing. And if I don't know what he looks like, how can I find him?"

Kershaul tugged at his goatee. "In the old days he favored the Exo-Cambian Cycle, and I believe he used an entire set of Nether Denizens. Now of course his tastes may have changed."

"Exactly," Thissell complained. "He might be twenty feet away and I'd never know it." He glanced bitterly across the esplanade toward the mask-maker's shop. "No one will tell me anything. I doubt if they care that a murderer is walking their docks."

"Quite correct," Kershaul agreed. "Sirenese standards are different from ours."

"They have no sense of responsibility," declared Thissell. "I doubt if they'd throw a rope to a drowning man."

"It's true that they dislike interference," Kershaul agreed. "They emphasize individual responsiblity and self-sufficiency."

"Interesting," said Thissell, "but I'm still in the dark about Angmark."

Kershaul surveyed him gravely. "And should you locate Angmark, what will you do then?"

"I'll carry out the orders of my superior," said Thissell doggedly.

"Angmark is a dangerous man," mused Kershaul. "He's got a number of advantages over you."

"I can't take that into account. It's my duty to send him back to Polypolis. He's probably safe, since I haven't the remotest idea how to find him."

KERSHAUL reflected. "An out-worlder can't hide behind a mask, not from the Sirenese at least. There are four of us here at Fan — Rolver, Welibus, you and me. If another out-worlder tries to set up housekeeping the news will get around in short order."

"What if he heads for Zundar?"

Kershaul shrugged. "I doubt if he'd dare. On the other hand —"

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Kershaul paused, then noting Thissell's sudden inattention, turned to follow Thissell's gaze.

A man in a Forest Goblin mask came swaggering toward them along the esplanade.

Kershaul laid a restraining hand on Thissell's arm, but Thissell stepped out into the path of the Forest Goblin, his borrowed gun ready. "Haxo Angmark," he cried, "don't make a move, or I'll kill you. You're under arrest."

"Are you sure this is Angmark?" asked Kershaul in a worried voice.

"I'll find out," said Thissell. "Angmark, turn around, hold up your hands."

The Forest Goblin stood rigid with surprise and puzzlement. He reached to his *zachinko,* played an interrogatory arpeggio and sang, "Why do you molest me, Moon-Moth?"

Kershaul stepped forward and played a placatory phrase on his *slobo.* "I fear that a case of confused identity exists, Ser Forest Goblin. Ser Moon-Moth seeks an out-worlder in a Forest Goblin mask."

The Forest Goblin's music became irritated, and he suddenly switched to his *stimic.* "He asserts that I am an out-worlder? Let him prove his case, or he has my retaliation to face."

Kershaul glanced in embarrassment around the crowd which had gathered and once more struck up an ingratiating melody. "I am positive that Ser Moon-Moth —"

The Forest Goblin interrupted with a fanfare of skaranyi tones. "Let him demonstrate his case or prepare for the flow of blood."

Thissell said, "Very well, I'll prove my case." He stepped forward, grasped the Forest Goblin's mask. "Let's see your face, that'll demonstrate your identity!"

The Forest Goblin sprang back in amazement. The crowd gasped, then set up an ominous strumming and toning of various instruments.

The Forest Goblin reached to the nape of his neck, jerked the cord to his duel-gong, and with his other hand snatched forth his scimitar.

Kershaul stepped forward, playing the *slobo* with great agitation. Thissell, now abashed, moved aside, conscious of the ugly sound of the crowd.

Kershaul sang explanations and apologies; the Forest Goblin answered; Kershaul spoke over his shoulder to Thissell: "Run for it, or you'll be killed! Hurry!"

THISSELL hesitated. The Forest Goblin put up his hand to thrust Kershaul aside. "Run!" screamed Kershaul. "To Welibus's office. Lock yourself in!"

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Thissell took to his heels. The Forest Goblin pursued him a few yards, then stamped his feet and sent after him a set of raucous and derisive blasts of the hand-bugle, while the crowd produced a contemptuous counterpoint of clacking *hymerkins*.

There was no further pursuit.

Instead of taking refuge in the Import-Export office, Thissell turned aside and after cautious reconnaissance proceeded to the dock where his houseboat was moored.

The hour was not far short of dusk when he finally returned aboard. Toby and Rex squatted on the forward deck, surrounded by the provisions they had brought back; reed baskets of fruit and cereal, blue-glass jugs containing wine, oil and pungent sap, three young pigs in a wicker pen. They were cracking nuts between their teeth and spitting the shells over the side. They looked up at Thissell, and it seemed that they rose to their feet with a new casualness. Toby muttered something under his breath; Rex smothered a chuckle.

Thissell clacked his *hymerkin* angrily. He sang, "Take the boat off-shore; tonight we remain at Fan."

In the privacy of his cabin he removed the Moon-Moth and stared into a mirror at his almost unfamiliar features. He picked up the Moon-Moth, examined the detested lineaments: the furry gray skin, the blue spines, the ridiculous lace flaps. Hardly a dignified presence for the Consular Representative of the Home Planets. If, in fact, he still held the position when Cromartin learned of Angmark's winning free!

Thissell flung himself into a chair and stared moodily into space. Today he'd suffered a series of setbacks. But he wasn't defeated yet, not by any means. Tomorrow he'd visit Mathew Kershaul; they'd discuss how best to locate Angmark.

As Kershaul had pointed out, another out-world establishment could not be camouflaged. Haxo Angmark's identity would soon become evident. Also, tomorrow he must procure another mask. Nothing extreme or vainglorious, but a mask which expressed a modicum of dignity and self-respect.

At this moment one of the slaves tapped on the door-panel, and Thissell hastily pulled the hated Moon-Moth back over his head.

IV

EARLY next morning, before the dawn-light had left the sky, the slaves sculled the houseboat back to that section of the

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dock set aside for the use of out-worlders. Neither Rolver nor Welibus nor Kershaul had yet arrived. Thissell waited impatiently.

An hour passed, and Welibus brought his boat to the dock. Not wishing to speak to Welibus, Thissell remained inside his cabin.

A few moments later Rolver's boat likewise pulled in alongside the dock. Through the window Thissell saw Rolver, wearing his usual Tarn-Bird, climb to the dock. Here he was met by a man in a yellow-tufted Sand Tiger mask, who played a formal accompaniment on his *gomapard* to whatever message he brought Rolver.

Rolver seemed surprised and disturbed. After a moment's thought he manipulated his own *gomapard* and, as he sang, he indicated Thissell's houseboat. Then, bowing, he went on his way.

The man in the Sand Tiger mask climbed with rather heavy dignity to the float and rapped on the bulwark of Thissell's houseboat.

Thissell presented himself. Sirenese etiquette did not demand that he invite a casual visitor aboard, so he merely struck an interrogation on his *zachinko*.

The Sand Tiger played his *gomapard* and sang, "Dawn over the bay of Fan is customarily a splendid occasion. The sky is white with yellow and green colors. When Mireille rises, the mists burn and writhe like flames. He who sings derives a greater enjoyment from the hour when the floating corpse of an out-worlder does not appear to mar the serenity of the view."

Thissell's *zachinko* gave off a startled interrogation almost of its own accord. The Sand Tiger bowed with dignity. "The singer acknowledges no peer in steadfastness of disposition; however, he does not care to be plagued by the antics of a dissatisfied ghost. He therefore has ordered his slaves to attach a thong to the ankle of the corpse, and while we have conversed they have linked the corpse to the stern of your houseboat. You will wish to administer whatever rites are prescribed in the out-world. He who sings wishes you a good morning and now departs."

Thissell rushed to the stern of his houseboat. There, near naked and maskless, floated the body of a mature man, supported by air trapped in his pantaloons.

Thissell studied the dead face, which seemed characterless and vapid — perhaps in direct consequence of the mask-wearing habit. The body appeared of medium stature and weight. Thissell estimated the age as between forty-

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five and fifty. The hair was nondescript brown, the features bloated by the water.

There was nothing to indicate how the man had died.

This must be Haxo Angmark, thought Thissell. Who else could it be? Mathew Kershaul? Why not? Thissell asked himself uneasily. Rolver and Welibus had already disembarked and gone about their business. He searched across the bay to locate Kershaul's houseboat, and discovered it already tying up to the dock. Even as he watched Kershaul jumped ashore, wearing his Cave-Owl mask.

He seemed in an abstracted mood, for he passed Thissell's houseboat without lifting his eyes from the dock.

Thissell turned back to the corpse: Angmark, then, beyond a doubt. Had not three men disembarked from the houseboats of Rolver, Welibus and Kershaul, wearing masks characteristic of these men? Obviously, the corpse of Angmark . . . The easy solution refused to sit quiet in Thissell's mind. Kershaul had pointed out that another outworlder would be quickly identified. How else could Angmark maintain himself? Unless . . . Thissell brushed the thought aside. The corpse was obviously Angmark.

And yet . . .

Thissell summoned his slaves, gave orders that a suitable container be brought to the dock, that the corpse be transferred therein, and conveyed to a suitable place of repose. The slaves showed no enthusiasm for the task and Thissell was forced to thunder forcefully, if not skillfully, on the *hymerkin* to emphasize his orders.

He walked along the dock, turned up the esplanade, passed the office of Cornely Welibus and set out along the pleasant little lane to the landing field.

WHEN he arrived, he found that Rolver had not yet made an appearance. An overslave, given status by a yellow rosette on his black cloth mask, asked how he might be of service. Thissell stated that he wished to dispatch a message to Polypolis.

There was no difficulty here, declared the slave. If Thissell would set forth his message in clear block-print it would be despatched immediately.

Thissell wrote:

OUT-WORLDER FOUND DEAD, POSSIBLY ANGMARK. AGE 48, MEDIUM PHYSIQUE, BROWN HAIR. OTHER MEANS OF IDENTIFICATION LACKING. AWAIT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND/OR INSTRUCTIONS.

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He addressed the message to Castel Cromartin at Polypolis and handed it to the over-slave. A moment later he heard the characteristic sputter of trans-space discharge.

An hour passed. Rolver made no appearance.

Thissell paced restlessly back and forth in front of the office. There was no telling how long he would have to wait. Trans-space transmission time varied unpredictably. Sometimes the message snapped through in micro-seconds; sometimes it wandered through unknowable regions for hours; and there were several authenticated examples of messages being received before they had been transmitted.

Another half-hour passed, and Rolver finally arrived, wearing his customary Tarn-Bird. Coincidentally Thissell heard the hiss of the incoming message.

Rolver seemed surprised to see Thissell. "What brings you out so early?"

Thissell explained. "It concerns the body which you referred to me this morning. I'm communicating with my superiors about it."

Rolver raised his head and listened to the sound of the incoming message. "You seem to be getting an answer. I'd better attend to it."

"Why bother?" asked Thissell. "Your slave seems to be efficient."

"It's my job," declared Rolver. "I'm responsible for the accurate transmission and receipt of all space-grams."

"I'll come with you," said Thissell. "I've always wanted to watch the operation of the equipment."

"I'm afraid that's irregular," said Rolver. He went to the door which led into the inner compartment. "I'll have your message in a moment."

Thissell protested, but Rolver ignored him and went into the inner office.

Five minutes later he reappeared, carrying a small yellow envelope. "Not too good news," he announced with unconvincing *commiseration.*

Thissell glumly opened the envelope. The message read:

> BODY NOT ANGMARK, ANGMARK HAS BLACK HAIR. WHY DID YOU NOT MEET LANDING? SERIOUS INFRACTION, HIGHLY DISSATISFIED. RETURN TO POLYPOLIS NEXT OPPORTUNITY.
>
> CASTEL CROMARTIN

Thissell put the message in his pocket. "Incidentally, may I inquire the color of your hair?"

Rolver played a surprised little trill on his *kiv.* "I'm quite blond. Why do you ask?"

"Mere curiosity."

Rolver played another run on the *kiv.* "Now I understand. My

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dear fellow, what a suspicious nature you have! Look!" He turned and parted the folds of his mask at the nape of his neck. Thissell saw that Rolver was blond indeed.

"Are you reassured?" asked Rolver jocularly.

"Oh, indeed," said Thissell. "Incidentally, have you another mask you could lend me? I'm sick of this Moon-Moth."

"I'm afraid not," said Rolver. "But you need merely go into a mask-maker's shop and make a selection."

"Yes, of course," said Thissell. He took leave of Rolver and returned along the trail to Fan.

PASSING Welibus' office he hesitated, then turned in. Today Welibus wore a dazzling confection of green glass prisms and silver beads, a mask Thissell had never seen before.

Welibus greeted him cautiously to the accompaniment of a *kiv*. "Good morning, Ser Moon-Moth."

"I won't take too much of your time," said Thissell, "but I have a rather personal question to put to you. What color is your hair?"

Welibus hesitated a fraction of a second, then turned his back, lifted the flap of his mask. Thissell saw heavy black ringlets. "Does that answer your question?" inquired Welibus.

"Completely," said Thissell. He crossed the esplanade, went out on the dock to Kershaul's houseboat. Kershaul greeted him without enthusiasm, and invited him aboard with a resigned wave of the hand.

"A question I'd like to ask," said Thissell. "What color is your hair?"

Kershaul laughed woefully. "What little remains is black. Why do you ask?"

"Curiosity."

"Come, come," said Kershaul with an unaccustomed bluffness. "There's more to it than that."

Thissell, feeling the need of counsel, admitted as much. "Here's the situation. A dead outworlder was found in the harbor this morning. His hair was brown. I'm not entirely certain, but the chances are — let me see, yes, two out of three that Angmark's hair is black."

Kershaul pulled at the Cave-Owl's goatee. "How do you arrive at that probability?"

"The information came to me through Rolver's hands. He has blond hair. If Angmark has assumed Rolver's identity, he would naturally alter the information which came to me this morning. Both you and Welibus admit to black hair."

"Hm," said Kershaul. "Let me see if I follow your line of reasoning. You feel that Haxo Angmark

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has killed either Rolver, Welibus or myself and assumed the dead man's identity. Right?"

Thissell looked at him in surprise. "You yourself emphasized that Angmark could not set up another out-world establishment without revealing himself! Don't you remember?"

"Oh, certainly. To continue. Rolver delivered a message to you stating that Angmark was dark, and announced himself to be blond."

"Yes. Can you verify this? I mean for the old Rolver?"

"No," said Kershaul sadly. "I've seen neither Rolver nor Welibus without their masks."

"IF Rolver is not Angmark," Thissell mused, "if Angmark indeed has black hair, then both you and Welibus come under suspicion."

"Very interesting," said Kershaul. He examined Thissell warily. "For that matter, you yourself might be Angmark. What color is your hair?"

"Brown," said Thissell curtly. He lifted the gray fur of the Moon-Moth mask at the back of his head.

"But you might be deceiving me as to the text of the message," Kershaul put forward.

"I'm not," said Thissell wearily. "You can check with Rolver if you care to."

Kershaul shook his head. "Unnecessary. I believe you. But another matter: what of voices? You've heard all of us before and after Angmark arrived. Isn't there some indication there?"

"No. I'm so alert for any evidence of change that you all sound rather different. And the masks muffle your voices."

Kershaul tugged the goatee. "I don't see any immediate solution to the problem." He chuckled. "In any event, need there be? Before Angmark's advent, there were Rolver, Welibus, Kershaul and Thissell. Now — for all practical purposes — there are still Rolver, Welibus, Kershaul and Thissell. Who is to say that the new member may not be an improvement upon the old?"

"An interesting thought," agreed Thissell, "but it so happens that I have a personal interest in identifying Angmark. My career is at stake."

"I see," murmured Kershaul. "The situation then becomes an issue between yourself and Angmark."

"You won't help me?"

"Not actively. I've become pervaded with Sirenese individualism. I think you'll find that Rolver and Welibus will respond similarly." He sighed. "All of us have been here too long."

Thissell stood deep in thought. Kershaul waited patiently a mo-

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ment, then said, "Do you have any further questions?"

"No," said Thissell. I have merely a favor to ask you."

"I'll oblige if I possibly can," Kershaul replied courteously.

"Give me, or lend me, one of your slaves, for a week or two."

Kershaul played an exclamation of amusement on the *ganga*. "I hardly like to part with my slaves. They know me and my ways —"

"As soon as I catch Angmark you'll have him back."

"Very well," said Kershaul. He rattled a summons on his *hymerkin*, and a slave appeared. "Anthony," sang Kershaul, "you are to go with Ser Thissell and serve him for a short period."

The slave bowed without pleasure.

THISSELL took Anthony to his houseboat, and questioned him at length, noting certain of the responses upon a chart. He then enjoined Anthony to say nothing of what had passed, and consigned him to the care of Toby and Rex. He gave further instructions to move the houseboat away from the dock and allow no one aboard until his return.

He set forth once more along the way to the landing field, and found Rolver at a lunch of spiced fish, shredded bark of the salad tree, and a bowl of native currants. Rolver clapped an order on the *hymerkin*, and a slave set a place for Thissell. "And how are the investigations proceeding?"

"I'd hardly like to claim any progress," said Thissell. "I assume that I can count on your help?"

Rolver laughed briefly. "You have my good wishes."

"More concretely," said Thissell, "I'd like to borrow a slave from you. Temporarily."

Rolver paused in his eating. "Whatever for?"

"I'd rather not explain," said Thissell. "But you can be sure that I make no idle request."

Without graciousness Rolver summoned a slave and consigned him to Thissell's service.

On the way back to his houseboat, Thissell stopped at Welibus' office.

Welibus looked up from his work. "Good afternoon, Ser Thissell."

Thissell came directly to the point. "Ser Welibus, will you lend me a slave for a few days?"

Welibus hesitated, then shrugged. "Why not?" He clacked his *hymerkin;* a slave appeared. "Is he satisfactory? Or would you prefer a young female?" He chuckled — rather offensively, to Thissell's way of thinking.

"He'll do very well. I'll return him in a few days."

"No hurry." Welibus made an

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easy gesture and returned to his work.

Thissell continued to his houseboat, where he separately interviewed each of his two new slaves and made notes upon his chart.

Dusk came soft over the Titanic Ocean. Toby and Rex sculled the houseboat away from the dock, out across the silken waters. Thissell sat on the deck listening to the sound of soft voices, the flutter and tinkle of musical instruments. Lights from the floating houseboats glowed yellow and wan watermelon-red. The shore was dark; the Nightmen would presently come slinking to paw through refuse and stare jealously across the water.

In nine days the *Buenaventura* came past Sirene on its regular schedule; Thissell had his orders to return to Polypolis. In nine days, could he locate Angmark?

Nine days weren't too many, Thissell decided, but they might possibly be enough.

V

TWO days passed, and three and four and five. Every day Thissell went ashore and at least once a day visited Rolver, Welibus and Kershaul.

Each reacted differently to his presence. Rolver was sardonic and irritable; Welibus formal and at least superficially affable; Kershaul mild and suave, but ostentatiously impersonal and detached in his conversation.

Thissell remained equally bland to Rolver's dour jibes, Welibus's jocundity, Kershaul's withdrawal. And every day, returning to his houseboat, he made marks on his chart.

The sixth, the seventh, the eighth day came and passed. Rolver, with rather brutal directness, inquired if Thissell wished to arrange for passage on the *Buenaventura*. Thissell considered, and said, "Yes, you had better reserve passage for one."

"Back to the world of faces," shuddered Rolver. "Faces! Everywhere pallid, fish-eyed faces. Mouths like pulp, noses knotted and punctured; flat flabby faces. I don't think I could stand it after living here. Luckily you haven't become a real Sirenese."

"But I won't be going back," said Thissell.

"I thought you wanted me to reserve passage."

"I do — for Haxo Angmark. He'll be returning to Polypolis, in the brig."

"Well, well," said Rolver. "So you've picked him out."

"Of course," said Thissell. "Haven't you?"

Rolver shrugged. "He's either Welibus or Kershaul, that's as close as I can make it. So long

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himself either Welibus or Kershaul, it means nothing to me."

"It means a great deal to me," said Thissell. "What time tomorrow does the lighter go up?"

"Eleven twenty-two sharp. If Haxo Angmark's leaving, tell him to be on time."

"He'll be here," said Thissell.

He made his usual call upon Welibus and Kershaul. Then, returning to his houseboat, he put three final marks on his chart.

The evidence was here, plain and convincing. Not absolutely incontrovertible evidence, but enough to warrant a definite move. He checked over his gun. Tomorrow was the day of decision. He could afford no errors.

THE day dawned bright white, the sky like the inside of an oyster shell. Mireille rose through iridescent mists. Toby and Rex sculled the houseboat to the dock. The remaining three out-world houseboats floated somnolently on the slow swells.

One boat Thissell watched in particular, that whose owner Haxo Angmark had killed and dropped into the harbor. This boat presently moved toward the shore, and Haxo Angmark himself stood on the front deck, wearing a mask Thissell had never seen before: a construction of scarlet feathers, black glass and spiked green hair. It was most impressive.

Thissell was forced to admire his poise. A clever scheme, cleverly planned and executed — but marred by an insurmountable difficulty.

Angmark returned within. The houseboat reached the dock. Slaves flung out mooring lines and lowered the gangplank. Thissell, his gun ready in the pocket flap of his robes, walked down the dock, went aboard. He pushed open the door to the saloon. The man at the table raised his red, black and green mask in surprise.

Thissell said, "Angmark, please don't argue or make any —"

Something hard and heavy tackled him from behind; he was flung to the floor, his gun wrested expertly away.

Behind him the *hymerkin* clattered; a voice sang, "Bind the fool's arms."

The man sitting at the table rose to his feet, removed the red, black and green mask to reveal the black cloth of a slave. Thissell twisted his head. Over him stood Haxo Angmark, wearing a mask Thissell recognized as a Dragon-Tamer, fabricated from black metal, with a knife-blade nose, socketed eyelids, and three crests running back over the scalp.

The mask's expression was un-

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readable, but Angmark's voice was triumphant. "I trapped you very easily."

"So you did," said Thissell. The slave finished knotting his wrists together. A clatter of Angmark's *hymerkin* sent him away. "Get to your feet," said Angmark. "Sit in that chair."

"What are we waiting for?" inquired Thissell.

"Two of our fellows still remain out on the water. We won't need them for what I have in mind."

"Which is?"

"You'll learn in due course," said Angmark. "We have an hour or so on our hands."

Thissell tested his bonds. They were undoubtedly secure.

ANGMARK seated himself. "How did you fix on me? I admit to being curious . . . Come, come," he chided as Thissell sat silently. "Can't you recognize that I have defeated you? Don't make affairs unpleasant for yourself."

Thissell shrugged. "I operated on a basic principle. A man can mask his face, but he can't mask his personality."

"Aha," said Angmark. "Interesting. Proceed."

"I borrowed a slave from you and the other two out-worlders, and I questioned them carefully. What masks had their masters worn during the month before your arrival? I prepared a chart and plotted their responses. Rolver wore the Tarn Bird about eighty percent of the time, the remaining twenty percent divided between the Sophist Abstraction and the Black Intricate. Welibus had a taste for the heroes of Kan-Dachan Cycle. He wore the Chalekun, the Prince Intrepid, the Seavain most of the time: six days out of eight. The other two days he wore his South-Wind or his Gay Companion. Kershaul, more conservative, preferred the Cave-Owl, the Star Wanderer, and two or three other masks he wore at odd intervals.

"As I say, I acquired this information from possibly its most accurate source, the slaves. My next step was to keep watch upon the three of you. Every day I noted what masks you wore and compared it with my chart. Rolver wore his Tarn-Bird six times, his Black Intricate twice. Kershaul wore his Cave-Owl five times, his Star Wanderer once, his Quincunx once and his Ideal of Perfection once. Welibus wore the Emerald Mountain twice, the Triple Phoenix three times, the Prince Intrepid once and the Shark-God twice."

Angmark nodded thoughtfully. "I see my error. I selected from Welibus's mask, but to my own taste — and, as you point out, I revealed myself. But only to

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you." He rose and went to the window. "Kershaul and Rolver are now coming ashore. They'll soon be past and about their business — though I doubt if they'd interfere in any case. They've both become good Sirenese."

Thissell waited in silence. Ten minutes passed. Then Angmark reached to a shelf and picked up a knife. He looked at Thissell. "Stand up."

Thissell slowly rose to his feet. Angmark approached from the side, reached out, lifted the Moon-Moth from Thissell's head. Thissell gasped and made a vain attempt to seize it. Too late; his face was bare and naked.

ANGMARK turned away, removed his own mask, donned the Moon-Moth. He struck a call on his *hymerkin*. Two slaves entered, stopped in shock at the sight of Thissell.

Angmark played a brisk tattoo, sang, "Carry this man up to the dock."

"Angmark," cried Thissell. "I'm maskless!"

The slaves seized him and, in spite of Thissell's desperate struggles, conveyed him out on the deck, along the float and up on the dock.

Angmark fixed a rope around Thissell's neck. He said, "You are now Haxo Angmark, and I am Edwer Thissell. Welibus is dead. You shall soon be dead. I can handle your job without difficulty. I'll play musical instruments like a Night-man and sing like a crow. I'll wear the Moon-Moth till it rots and then I'll get another. The report will go to Polypolis, Haxo Angmark is dead. Everything will be serene."

Thissell barely heard. "You can't do this," he whispered. "My mask, my face . . ." A large woman in a blue and pink flower mask walked down the dock. She saw Thissell and, emitting a piercing shriek, flung herself prone on the dock.

"Come along," said Angmark brightly. He tugged at the rope and pulled Thissell down the dock. A man in a Pirate Captain mask coming up from his houseboat stood rigid in amazement.

Angmark played the *zachinko* and sang, "Behold the notorious criminal Haxo Angmark. Through all the outer-worlds his name is reviled. Now he is captured and led in shame to his death. Behold Haxo Angmark!"

They turned into the esplanade. A child screamed in fright. A man called hoarsely. Thissell stumbled; tears tumbled from his eyes; he could see only disorganized shapes and colors. Angmark's voice belled out richly: "Everyone behold the criminal of the out-worlds, Haxo Angmark!

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Approach and observe his execution!"

Thissell feebly cried out, "I'm not Angmark. I'm Edwer Thissell; *he's* Angmark." But no one listened to him. There were only cries of dismay, shock, disgust at the sight of his face. He called to Angmark, "Give me my mask, a slave-cloth . . ."

Angmark sang jubilantly. "In shame he lived, in maskless shame he dies."

A Forest Goblin stood before Angmark. "Moon-Moth, we meet once more."

Angmark sang, "Stand aside, friend Goblin. I must execute this criminal. In shame he lived, in shame he dies!"

A crowd had formed around the group; masks stared in morbid titillation at Thissell.

The Forest Goblin jerked the rope from Angmark's hand and threw it to the ground. The crowd roared. Voices cried, "No duel, no duel! Execute the monster!"

A CLOTH was thrown over Thissell's head. Thissell awaited the thrust of a blade. But instead his bonds were cut. Hastily he adjusted the cloth, hiding his face, peering between the folds.

Four men clutched Haxo Angmark. The Forest Goblin confronted him, playing the *skaranyi*. "A week ago you reached to divest me of my mask. You have now achieved your perverse aim!"

"But he is a criminal," cried Angmark. "He is notorious, infamous!"

"What are his misdeeds?" sang the Forest Goblin.

"He has murdered, betrayed; he has wrecked ships; he has tortured, blackmailed, robbed, sold children into slavery; he has —"

The Forest Goblin stopped him. "Your religious convictions are of no importance. We can vouch however for your present crimes!"

The hostler stepped forward. He sang fiercely, "This insolent Moon-Moth nine days ago sought to pre-empt my choicest mount!"

Another man pushed close. He wore a Universal Expert, and sang, "I am a Master Mask-maker; I recognize this Moon-Moth out-worlder! Only recently he entered my shop and derided my skill. He deserves death!"

"Death to the out-world monster!" cried the crowd. A wave of men surged forward.

Steel blades rose and fell. The deed was done.

Thissell watched, unable to move. The Forest Goblin approached, and playing the *stimic* sang sternly, "For you we have pity, but also contempt. A true man would never suffer such indignities!"

Thissell took a deep breath. He

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reached to his belt and found his *zachinko*. He sang, "My friend, you malign me! Can you not appreciate true courage? Would you prefer to die in combat or walk maskless along the esplanade?"

The Forest Goblin sang, "There is only one answer. First I would die in combat; I could not bear such shame."

Thissell sang, "I had such a choice. I could fight with my hands tied, and so die — or I could suffer shame, and through this shame conquer my enemy. You admit that you lack sufficient *strakh* to achieve this deed. I have proved myself a hero of bravery! I ask, who here has courage to do what I have done?"

"Courage?" demanded the Forest Goblin. "I fear nothing, up to and beyond death at the hands of the Night-men!"

"Then answer."

THE Forest Goblin stood back. He played his *double-kamanthil*. "Bravery indeed, if such were your motives."

The hostler struck a series of subdued *gomapard* chords and sang, "Not a man among us would dare what this maskless man has done."

The crowd muttered approval.

The mask-maker approached Thissell, obsequiously stroking his *double-kamanthil*. "Pray, Lord Hero, step into my nearby shop, exchange this vile rag for a mask befitting your quality."

Another mask-maker sang, "Before you choose, Lord Hero, examine my magnificent creations!"

A man in a Bright Sky Bird mask approached Thissell reverently. "I have only just completed a sumptuous houseboat; seventeen years of toil have gone into its fabrication. Grant me the good fortune of accepting and using this splendid craft. Aboard waiting to serve you are alert slaves and pleasant maidens; there is ample wine in storage and soft silken carpets on the decks."

"Thank you," said Thissell, striking the *zachinko* with vigor and confidence. "I accept with pleasure. But first a mask."

The mask-maker struck an interrogative trill on the *gomapard*. "Would the Lord Hero consider a Sea-Dragon Conqueror beneath his dignity?"

"By no means," sang Thissell. "I consider it suitable and satisfactory. We shall go now to examine it."

—JACK VANCE

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